

INFERNO!



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

BACK IN the eighties it was the 'in-thing' to boast about your achievements, blow your own trumpet and generally let people know just how good you are. This was the age of Thatcherism, billionaire stockbrokers and Yuppies, and the Harry Enfield creation Loadsamoney was one of the most popular characters on TV.

With the onset of the 'caring' nineties, such behaviour began to be perceived as crass and the trend reversed, so much so that failure seemed to be greeted with more fanfare than success. If you need proof of this you have to look no further than the exploits of British tennis players at Wimbledon or the England football team being hailed national heroes just for getting past the first round of the World Cup finals. Even Loadsamoney was killed off to raise money for charity.

Now that we've moved into the early twenty-first century we're struggling to find a label to attach to our current decade – heck, we can't even decide what to call it (when was the last time you heard anybody use the word 'noughties' in relation to our current era?). Instead, what's happening

is that, either consciously or subconsciously, we've decided to take the best (and sometimes the worst) bits of the previous five decades and claim them for the present day.

Just look around you: sports shops stacked high with trainers that first went on sale over thirty years ago, Elvis Presley has another number one single with a remix of a song he first performed way back in 1968, remakes of classic sixties and seventies movies like *The Italian Job* and *Planet of the Apes*. Even Eminem – currently the world's most successful recording artist – has sampled a 1970's Aerosmith classic on his latest single.

Well, if sampling the seventies is good enough for Eminem then I'm going to go ahead and sample the past by blowing the Black Library's collective trumpet.

HERE'S JUST some of the things we've achieved since the formation of the Black Library some six-and-a-bit years ago.

- 1.3 million English language novels sold worldwide.

- As of this writing, over 70 novels and short story collections published.

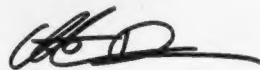
- Black Library novels are translated into 8 other languages.

- BL novels regularly appearing on the Locus magazine top-ten gaming related titles list.

- Warhammer Monthly won the National Comic Award for Best New Comic in 1999 and the Daemonifuge graphic novel won the Borders Books Award for Best Graphic Novel in 2003. Dan Abnett won the award for Best Writer – Now at the same awards ceremony.

- Black Library characters have been immortalised as gaming pieces for the Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 games systems and are included in army books and codexes, most notably Gaunt's Ghosts, Malus Darkblade and Gotrek & Felix.

Wow, how much are we going to have achieved after twelve years?



Christian Dunn

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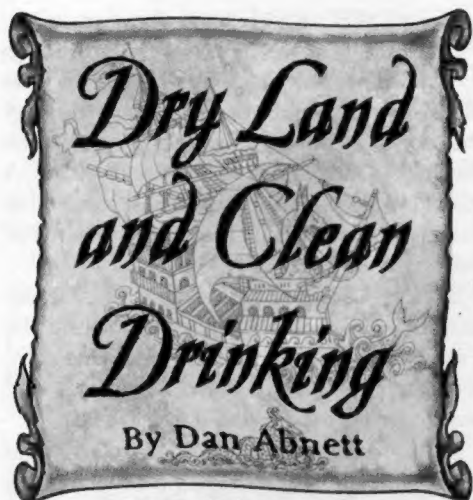
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A Fell Cargo Story

JUNIO THE STOREKEEPER, may the four winds rest him, had been a man of methodical practise and scrupulous measure and, under his stewardship, the *Rumour* had been fully provisioned with clean drinking, ale and edibles. But Junio the storekeeper was several weeks dead.

His duties had fallen to Benuto the bo'sun and Fahd the cook in the way that a drunken man falls between two seats at a table. Gello, the lug-eared boy who had served as Junio's pantryman, had tried to take up the slack, but he had not enough person to him to make himself heard. He was a gawky lad, with freckled skin that the sun punished terribly, and his ears, which abutted his head like a pair of staysails in full weather, were such a source of jokes that he could not appear on deck but to be mocked. To his credit, Gello made several attempts to alert the master to the growing deficiencies, but no one paid him any mind. He had, as it might be said, no one's ear, which was passing strange, as he had ear enough of his own.

Matters finally came to a head on the morning of the twenty-ninth day of sailing. It was before ten of the day, and the air was cool and brisk. Hot promise of stillness lingered in the edge of the sky, and the sea glittered, but there was a firm so'wester and plenty of air to fill the yards. They were threading through the maze of islets and reefs that decorated the Estalian littoral, as they had been since the grim matter of the *Sacramento*, and no sail or face had they seen but for their own.

Sesto, who had been awake for several hours, tucked away against the foremast with a book of histories, heard voices raised and went aft. Fahd was by the deck barrels, arguing famously with Largo the sailmaker. Neither man was large: both were wizened and hunched by age, weather and profession, but Sesto would not have crossed either one of them. The scale of their invective shamed typhoons for force. Largo retched out malingering curses and those barbed, Tilean-style insults which slurred Fahd's family members, the chastity of relevant women, and the shape of several beards. Fahd, in turn, cited dubious parentage and unfortunate genital quandaries, all the while interspersing colourful Arabyan oaths, the sort of thing that, when translated, lost all their poisonous force and meant something like: 'I hit you on the head with a spoon, you monkey!'

Several crewmen gathered to watch the curse-fight, some clapping, some laughing. Sesto was askance. He sensed it was about to turn ugly.

Or, at the very least, uglier.

Largo informed the esteemed Arabyan that a donkey bearing such a remarkable similarity to Fahd's mother that it probably was, in point of fact, Fahd's mother, had enjoyed a night of uncivilised congress with three of his brothers, and drew his long, round-nosed hemp blade.

Fahd – declaring Largo a panting dog that had eaten a cat, and the cat had farted (often) and now Largo also smelled of cat-fart, and he was also a snail with a funny face, which Fahd would crush with the heel of his slipper, if he could be half-bothered – slid out his carving knife.

'I think this has gone far enough!' Sesto exclaimed, stepping between them.

'Go boil your arse in guano, dung-eater, for then it will smell as good as your sister's hairy armpits,' snarled Largo, raising a serrated sail-tool as long as Sesto's shin bone.

'I will strike your brow repeatedly with the slack and underused parts of a bear!' Fahd promised, hefting a flesh-slice as wide as Sesto's wrist.

There was a thunderclap of gunpowder, and everyone started out of their skins. Lowering a discharged caliver, wreathed in

white smoke, Roque walked into the confrontation.

'Put them away,' he told the combative pair. Fahd and Largo reluctantly sheathed their blades.

Roque smiled. It was a pleasure to see such an expression on his face. Since the long, hideous night on Isla Verde, he had been pale and withdrawn from his injury, and had lost a great deal of weight. The smile reminded Sesto of the Roque he had first met.

'Explain,' Roque said.

They did. Loudly and against each other, so their words overlapped and turned into shouts. Roque thumbed back the caliver's locked, carefully primed it from his powder flask and then fired it again.

The blast was dizzying.

'Explain... one at a time. Fahd?'

The water butts, explained the Arabyan, were knocking dry and all the clean drinking was gone. In his opinion, Largo had been pailing up water to stretch and soften his cloth. Not at all, Largo countered when Roque looked at him. The reverse was, in fact, the truth. He had come for a ladle of wet to moisten up a sail hem, and discovered that Fahd had guzzled all the water away for his malodorous stews.

Roque checked the barrels. Nothing came up but sour dredges.

Silvaro was called. He checked the barrels in turn and registered the same. Only then did anyone ask Gello.

All vittals were low, the boy explained. During the tangle with Ru'af, five water cisterns had been holed and drained, and a goodly lot of foodstuffs burned. They were dry and down to hardtack. 'Something I've been trying to explain,' Gello added.

Belissi, the carpenter, was called to mend the water butts, but that would not fill them. There were wells and springs on some of the islets, though none good enough for more than a pail or two.

Silvaro called to Benuto. Their hunting had to cease for a while. Provisioning had become a necessity.



PORTO REAL WAS the surest bet. Silvaro would have preferred to make for the Isla D'Azure, and the pirate-friendly harbour there, but the way the wind was running discouraged such thoughts. Porto Real would have to do. A colony of the Estalian crown, it lay a little to their south on one of the largest islands of the archipelago.

So it was, and not before time, the *Rumour* and its consort, the *Safire*, came around the Cap D'Orient and turned into the bay, towards the lights of Porto Real. They had been at sea for three and a half weeks.

It was evening, equatorially warm and shadow-blue. There were no ships in the harbour. From the rail, Sesto saw over half a dozen brigs and barques careened up on the bone-white foreshore in the dusk, hull-bellies tipped towards the stars like basking sea lions, masts pushed over on the lea like windblown elms. It had been the same in Sartosa. Seafaring men, even the toughest of the rogues, had fled the sea this season. The Butcher Ship was out there, stalking any and all. It wasn't safe, for pirate and merchant alike. Safer by far was to hole up in an island town or a friendly port and drink the summer out, no matter the loss of earnings.

Estalian banners hung limply from yard poles on the quay, as if admitting with a lacklustre shrug the sovereignty of the colony town. Batteries of culverin covered the harbour from little headland redoubts, but they were unmanned, though the firebaskets hanging above them had been lit. The town itself, as it faced the sea, was a mix of lime-wash and clay brick, in the Estalian manner. In the higher part of the town, lanes ran up to a little garrison fort, beyond which rose lush green hills.

'Quiet,' said Silvaro simply, watching the harbour line slowly approach.

'Not so,' said Casaudor, and pointed. Figures had appeared on the quay and the runway, and around the heads of the town streets where they reached the harbourside. Shadows in the dying light, but people none the less.

'We must be a rare sight, so tell,' Benuto muttered. 'Like as much, they've not seen a ship in weeks.'

They dropped anchor a few hundred spans from the quay, and the *Safire* nestled in under their shadow. Silvaro called for a boat crew, and beckoned Roque and Sesto to come.

'We may need your airs and graces,' he told Sesto as they went down into the waiting boat.

By the time they came up the eroded stone steps onto the quay, the silent crowds had all but vanished. They could see lamp light coming from the buildings near the harbour, but no sounds of laughter or of music.

Roque, Sesto and Silvaro advanced together into the town, unnerved by its hush. The land heat was oppressive, and their clothes stuck to them.

Along the harbour end and down the main street, doors and window shutters stood open. Lamps burned within. In silence, as if weighted down to fatigue by the night heat, men, women and children sat on doorsteps, or lurked inside at tables. Some looked sullenly out at the three newcomers as they walked past. Many did not. Every doorway and window seemed to reveal a little yellow-lit cave in which weary people sat in torpor. Even dogs lay out in the dust.

They passed an inn where men sat at tables, clutching thick-lipped glasses full of drink that looked like tar or syrup in the golden light. Everything seemed brown and faded, like an old painting hung too long in the sun. The drinkers were all silent too, and slouched: glasses on tables, hands around glasses, bodies sunk back on chairs.

Silvaro stopped, and gestured his companions into the bar. A few heads swung round slowly to watch them pass. A few murmurs. The bar owner stood at the back of the room, unwashed glasses lined up on the bar. He was leaning against the back wall, as if cowed by the heat.

'Three cups of rum,' Silvaro said in decent Estalian. The barman stirred and picked three little snifter glasses from a shelf. The rum looked almost black in the gloom as it poured into the glasses, and it seemed as reluctant to leave the bottle as the man had been to move.

'You're from the ships?' the barman asked. He spoke Estalian, but with the rounded vowels of a man born in Tobaro. The islands

were home to men of all compass points, no matter the flags they wore. His voice was slow, a tired whisper.

'We are,' said Luka.

'There was excitement when your sails were seen,' the barman said. 'Porto Real is a merchant town, and its lifeblood runs from the sea. But you are not merchants. That much we saw.'

'We are not.' Silvaro lifted his glass and took a sip. 'To the crown of Estalia,' he toasted politely. Sesto and Roque drank too. The rum burned, and its wetness was fat with sugar. It was like watered molasses.

Silvaro put a small silver coin on the bar. 'But there is trade in us. Victuals. Water. We can pay.'

'This can be arranged,' the barman said, picking up the coin.

'Where is the harbour master?'

The man shrugged. 'At this hour? Asleep or drunk... or both.'

Roque glanced up and cocked his head. In another second, Sesto heard it too. Hooves clattering on the street outside.

'They'll be looking for you,' the barman said.

Silvaro and his companions went back out into the street. Three riders were slowing their horses to a walk. The men wore the breastplates and comb morion helmets of Estalian soldiers. They were looking out into the harbour towards the shadow of the *Rumour*, still visible in the heavy night.

Silvaro hailed them, and they turned. The leader, a tall man wearing black beneath his polished armour, dismounted and tossed his reins to one of the others.

'Those are fighting ships,' he announced in strong Estalian. 'Plunder ships.'

'They are,' Silvaro agreed. 'And I am their master.'

The man nodded, a formal bow. It was a gesture rather than a courtesy, the sort of movement a man would make before a sword bout. 'I am Ferrol, first sword of the Porto, instrument of the governor. Who is it I address?'

'I am Captain Luka Silvaro.'

There was a brisk, raking sound of steel. Ferrol and his mounted lackeys drew their rapiers with abrupt speed. 'Luka Silvaro? Silvaro the Hawk? Master of the Rievers?'

'Thrice counted,' Luka smiled. He glanced at his companions. Roque's blade was half-drawn and Sesto's hand was on his pommel. 'Put them up,' he advised.

He took a step forward, apparently fearless for his own safety. The sword in Ferrol's hand was long and basket hilted, with a straight blade of the finest watered steel.

'Sir,' said Luka. 'I have business in Porto Real, not mischief. Had I meant the colony harm, I would have been dashing the harbourside with chain shot from my two fighting ships, not standing here unarmed.'

'You're a pirate and a rogue,' Ferrol replied.

'I am a captain, and a master seeking victuals from a friendly port, and moreover, I have coin to pay. There is another thing...' Luka reached into his doublet and produced a roll of parchment. He held it out to Ferrol.

The man took it cautiously. He unrolled it and read it over.

'A letter of marque and reprisal, signed and sealed by his grace, the Prince of Luccini. My business is official and legitimate, as my associate here can vouch.'

Sesto moved forward. 'My lord the Prince has engaged me to vouch for Captain Silvaro's good bearing. I express respectful greeting to his excellency the Governor, and trust the good and ancient friendship that exists between the sovereignties of Luccini and Estalia holds true.'

Ferrol handed the papers back and resheathed his sword. His men put their weapons away. 'Prepare a list of your needs, and a price will be determined. Once it is agreed, I will issue you with a permit to obtain the goods. Your men may come ashore, no more than two dozen at a time. Any trouble will be censured by colonial law. That means me. I am first sword, and also the colony's legal executioner. I will not allow brute behaviour.'

'Nor should you,' said Silvaro. 'I thank you. My crew will be a model of good humour.'



IT WAS EARLY still, not even eight of the clock. The night was as dark and hot now as if a damp cloak had been drawn over the sky with the sun still in it. There was no relief from the humid warmth. Silvaro sent the boat back to the *Rumour* to fetch Casaudor, and to draw by straws the first two dozen for shore leave. Roque, Sesto and Silvaro waited for a while in the stifling bar, but the lethargy became too draining, so they purchased a bottle of muscat and retired to the harbour wall, supping in a pass-around and relishing the meagre sea-breeze that came in across the water.

Longboats came back from the *Rumour*, three of them this time. Casaudor came up first, clutching the slates of requirements he and Fahd had been drawing up. Gello was with him. Casaudor had job enough being master mate, and had decided to get Junio's apprentice up to speed. Behind them came the lucky straws. Eight men from the *Rumour*, four from the *Safire*. Sesto didn't know the *Safire*'s men, except the ship's master, Silke. Chance... or more likely rank-pulling... had made sure Silke was one of the first ashore. His broad frame was wrapped in a red tunic of Araby silk, painted with clover-leaf designs in black futris ink, and he sported a purple slouch cap over his seven pigtailed coiffure.

Sesto knew the men from the *Rumour*. Vento, the sail-maker, Zazara, Small Willm (as opposed to Tall Willm, whose straw had been unlucky), Runcio and Lupresso. The sixth man surprised him. It was Sheerglas, the master gunner. Sesto had never seen that spectre of a man above decks, let alone on shore. He wore long robes of black, as if attending a funeral.

'Two hours,' Silvaro told the visitors. 'Then change smartly for the next boats. And make no trouble, or you'll hear from me.'

The men began to disperse into the quiet town.

Casaudor and Gello brought the slates over and were discussing them with Luka when horsemen rode up onto the quay, escorting two carriages. The carriages were ornate and once-fine, their carved decorations covered in gilt that was flaking away in the salt air. Each was drawn by a six

horse team and their lamps blazed like mast-lightning in the dark.

The outriders, all Estalian soldiers in comb helms, were carrying spears upright at the saddle bow. Ferrol dismounted.

He came to Luka and bowed. 'His excellency the Governor Emeric Gorge invites you to dine with him this night. He makes the invitation as a gesture of hospitality to the servants of his grace, the Prince of Luccini.'

'I am honoured by the invitation,' Luka said. 'How many does it extend to?'

'All of you,' Ferrol replied.

Luka left Casaudor and Gello to get on with arrangements. A few drowsy-looking merchants had been persuaded out of their town houses to haggle prices. The rest of the *Rumour* men boarded the coaches with Luka.

All except Sheerglas, Sesto noted. Sheerglas had disappeared.



THE CARRIAGES, lamps gleaming in the tropical night, took them out of the sleeping town and up into the hills. After weeks of sea life, such conveyance was very strange to all of them. The coaches shook and rattled in a way a ship never did, not even in a tempest. Every rut and crevice in the roadway made them jump and clatter. The coach interiors – faded velvet and polished oak – were well lit with sconced lanterns, and made little worlds of firelight that reminded Sesto unpleasantly of the tired melancholy he'd viewed through the windows in the town. He'd managed to get a window seat, and the compartments of the carriages were cramped. The men, some of them the roughest, rudest ratings, were gabbing excitedly. This ride, and the dinner that awaited them – with the island governor no less – was a once-in-a-lifetime jolly.

Sesto looked out at the rolling landscape: dark fields under a moonless gloom. It had been a long time since he'd ridden in a state carriage, or any carriage. Outside, the crickets bricked louder than the beating hooves and the rattle of wooden wheels.

Sugar cane plantations and plantain rows, dry and coarse, reached away into the humid night.

He was thirsty. The rum he'd drunk had caked his throat like bitumen-caulk. He longed for clean drinking.



THE GOVERNOR'S mansion stood at the brow of an inland hill, gazing out over the plantations and woodland that fed both it and the island. It was a red brick edifice, with a palatial front and decorated with the influence of Araby, as Estalian fashion had much favoured a century or so before. Pink bougainvillea draped the nearby trees. Candles flickered at every window in the facade, and torches and braziers, gushing sparks into the night, had been arranged in the court yard. Moths, in their hundreds, circled the lights. As the Rievers dismounted from the coaches, many of them awe struck at the faded grandeur of the place, they heard music playing from within. Pipes, a viol, a spinnet. This was living like they'd never known.

Ferrol, a striding, purposeful figure in black, led them into the hallway, where they stood on polished marble and gazed up at glittering chandeliers. On the walls, gilt-edged mirrors of stupendous quality and size alternated with portraits of Estalian nobles: goateed men in ruffs, bosomy ladies with skins like chalk, children in silk pantaloons. Every painted eye seemed to follow them.

'Of all men I expected to welcome to my home, Luka Silvaro is about the last,' said a rich, soft voice. The governor of Porto Real, Emeric Gorge, stepped into the hall. He was an old man, completely bald, his dry white skin creased with age and drawn tight across his lean face. His eyes were bright. He wore red velvet doublet and hose, and a cape of white silk that was almost painfully clean and spotless. He opened his arms wide. His fingers, clustered with rings, were pale and thin.

'My lord governor,' Luka said, dropping to his knee.

'Rise up, pirate lord... or should that be privateer now?'

'I am the proud bearer of the marque of Luccini,' Luka said, rising.

'The only reason you are welcomed here, to this house and this island,' Gorge chuckled and winked at Luka. 'I'm lying. The chance to dine and converse with the Riever Lord? Forgive me, but I count that as a luxury. I trust you and your motley followers can regale me with blood-chilling tales of cut-throat daring.'

'We'll do our best,' Luka said. Quickly, he introduced his crew. Sesto was touched by the humble formality shown by the common dog ratings. Men like Zazara and Small Willm doffed their scarf-caps and bent their knees. The Rievers were on best behaviour.

Silke did not fawn. He wanted it known he was a ship master, second only to Silvaro. He preened and conversed agily with the governor when his turn came.

Gorge reached Roque. 'An Estalian brother?' he remarked.

Roque bowed. 'A son of the sea, rather,' he demurred.

'But you have a noble look about you,' Gorge persisted. 'I am reminded of the Della Fortunas, that high born family. Is their blood in you?'

'I have only a poor freebooter's blood in my veins,' said Roque.

'Aha! We will see.'

'And this is Sesto Sciortini, a gentleman from Luccini,' Luka said at last.

Sesto bowed quickly. Gorge gazed at him, his tiny, pale tongue wetting his drawn lips as if they were too dry.

'Estalia welcomes its friend from across the sea,' Gorge said in perfect Southern Tilean. 'Come, let us feast.'

The governor led them into a great hall. The roof was three storeys high, and brazier fires around the walls created that golden fire glow that Sesto now associated with lethargy and torpor. The musicians were playing on the balcony, and servants were placing the last of the dishes on the long trestle tables. Roast pork, braised fish, spice-stuffed fowl, bowls of steamed vegetables, baked plantains, sugar-glazed fruit, sausage, curd cheese, plates of rice and shrimp. Gorge ushered them all to seats, and stewards began to track back and forth,

filling their goblets – silver beakers inscribed with the Estalian coat of arms – with wine and watered rum.

'I want water,' Sesto said.

'Sir?' the steward asked, poised to pour his jug of wine.

'Water. I'm thirsty.'

The steward nodded, and came back with a glass bell-bottle full of cold water.

Sesto filled his glass and drank deep.

'I cannot deny that times have been tight,' Gorge told Luka as they tore into the salted pork. 'My town lives or dies by the process of trade. Ships come in, ships go out. Porto Real turns over. Six months now, trade has been dead. Before tonight, it's four months since a ship put in.'

'I sensed a malaise,' Luka said.

'How so?' Gorge asked, wiping grease from his chin with his napkin.

'In the town. A strange lethargy, as if the heat had sweltered the life out of the citizens.'

Gorge nodded. 'Porto Real is dying. Without trade it is drying up. You'll find you get a good price for your water and victuals. It's a buyer's market.'

He reached out and took a chicken leg from a nearby dish. Liquid sugar dripped off it as he raised it to his mouth.

'There is an illness too.'

'An illness? Plague?' Luka started.

Gorge raised his hand quickly. 'Be of calm heart, Luka Silvaro! I would have had the quay men raise the quarantine flags if plague had entered Porto Real. No, it's something much more subtle. A malingering weakness. A sapping of strength. It might be the heat, or the draining emptiness of the season.'

'I saw it in the faces around me,' Roque said.

Gorge nodded. 'We have been craving newcomers. New arrivals. Fresh blood, so to speak. Anything to enliven our lives. Commerce and intercourse has run dry.'

Luka raised a fat scallop to his mouth on his twin-tined fork. Cooking butter ran down the handle over his fingers. He bit into its flesh. 'Because of the Butcher Ship?' he said.

'Because of the Butcher Ship precisely,' Gorge agreed, watching as Luka devoured the scallop. 'That hideous thing is out there,

and no ships dare sail. It is a monster, dare I say it... a vampire, sucking the life out of a sea that was once thronging with trade.'

'The Butcher Ship is the reason I have been awarded my letter of marque,' said Luka.

Gorge was impressed. 'You are charged to kill it? Well, then. Good luck, Silvaro.'

'Have you seen it?' Luka asked.

'I have heard stories. Better men than you have died facing it. Once, at nightfall three weeks ago, I was called to the quay because yards had been seen. A daemon ship, as black as night, coursed in, took a look at us, and sailed away. I am certain it was the Butcher Ship. The very sight of it terrified me.'

Luka nodded.

'And you're going to hunt it out and sink it?'

'That's the plan,' said Luka Silvaro

Sesto took a swig of his drink. He'd finished the water now, and the steward had been topping him up with wine.

He swilled down some of the wine, and then took a helping of sausage from the nearest dish.

He felt very tired suddenly.



SESTO WOKE with a start. His mind was as blurry as a fog-bound dawn. He thought he'd been woken by a cry of pain or fear, but it was quiet now.

There was a taste of spices in his mouth. The flavoured meats and sausage of the governor's table. He remembered the meal now, the heat, the cloying damp of the night. He had no memory whatsoever of making his way back to the harbour, let alone returning to the *Rumour* and his bed. The Estalians deserved respect for the power of their wines.

A sobering anxiety abruptly washed through him. He had no memory of returning to the ship, because he had not done so. Without even opening his eyes, he knew he was still on dry land.

Sesto struggled upright. The room he was in was so pitch black, he could not even estimate its size, but from the heat and the

stridulation of the crickets outside, he felt sure he was still in the governor's mansion house. The sounds of snoring breath around him told him he was not alone.

He tried to feel his way around, and bumped into first one and then a second prone body. Neither one roused. Then his hands found the edge of a sideboard cabinet or a table, and from there, the wall. He picked his way along the wall to a corner, then along again until his fingers settled on the metal latch of a door. Cautiously, he drew it open.

The hallway outside was gloomy, but tapers burned in brackets towards the far end, and he started to be able to see his surroundings. He pushed the door open wider and began to resolve features of the room he had woken in. It was a state room of some size, furnished with low chairs and two chaise longues. The Rievers who had come with him to the banquet were sprawled about the room, on the floor, lolling on furniture, all sleeping soundly. What was this? Had they all imbibed so much the governor's men had thrown them in this room to sleep it off?

Sesto realised he was mistaken. He counted the sleeping shadows again. Not everyone was here. There was no sign of Small Willm, Runcio, or one of Silke's crew.

Silvaro lay nearby, and Sesto shook him to wake him. To no avail. But for his low, raspy breathing, the captain was as limp as death. Sesto tried to wake Silke, and then Roque and Vento. Not a man of them would respond.

Sesto went back out into the hallway, and at once heard approaching footsteps. He pulled the door shut, and slipped into hiding behind an embroidered arras. Immediately, he felt foolish. Why was he hiding when there was no real cause to suspect danger? He reached to touch the hilt of his sword, so that the metal might give him good fortune. His scabbard was empty. His knife had gone too.

Now he had cause. If all this was innocent, why had his weapons been taken from him?

Figures approached, marching urgently. It was Ferrol, and four of his guardsmen. They carried oil lamps. They opened the door of the stateroom and went inside. Sesto had to strain to hear them as they spoke.

'What about Silvaro?' one of the men seemed to suggest. Sesto couldn't hear all of Ferrol's answer. Part of it ran '...says he's sick of pirate salt... like mongrel dogs... thoroughbred Estalian...'

There was movement, and then the guard party reemerged from the room, dragging Roque and Zazara, Estalians both. Ferrol closed the door and went off down the corridor behind the men and their slumbering loads.

Sesto took off after them, following at a cautious distance. The windows that he passed revealed to him the night was still on the island, though from the pale edge of it, dawn was not too many hours away.

Ferrol and his men disappeared through the great doors into the banquet hall. Sesto followed, pausing at a pair of crossed sabres that hung on the wall beneath an Estalian roundel. His hosts had wanted him weaponless, so caution suggested a weapon would be good to have.

He reached the doors. They had been left ajar, and he was able to peer in.

What a sight he saw. The musicians and servants had long since departed, but the banquet had not been cleared. Tables of plates and half-eaten fare had been pushed back and dishes piled up. Seven men of his colonial guard, black clad and comb-helmed, stood around the walls of the room, both watching and waiting.

Emeric Gorge stood in the middle of the room. He had stripped to the waist, his arms and upper body pallid white like a stinging jelly. His back was to Sesto, and his arms down at his sides. A guardsman knelt at his right hand and another at his left, as if each was kissing the backs of Gorge's hands in ritual homage. Roque and Zazara, sleeping still, lay near the doorway.

Small Willm, Runcio and the man from Silke's crew lay in a heap at the far end of the room. Somehow, the limpness of their bodies told Sesto they were more than asleep. Even a slumbering man does not relax and fold so completely.

'Enough!' said Gorge, and the two men rose, wiping their mouths on black handkerchiefs. As Gorge turned, Sesto saw with horror that his inner wrists were wet with blood.

'Another!' he said. Two guards moved from the wall, and scooped up Zazara. They dragged him to Gorge, and held him up as Gorge pulled the Riever's head back by the hair and held a small crystal bottle under his nose.

Zazara woke, coughing and spluttering. He looked around, bemused, not really comprehending his surroundings. The guards let him stand.

Gorge restoppered the crystal bottle and set it aside on a table, then walked back to the blinking, woozy Zazara.

'Estalian,' he murmured. 'A better vintage...'

Gorge seized Zazara by the upper part of the left arm and the hair, and wrenched his head aside so his throat was exposed. Gorge's widening mouth was suddenly full of long, sharp teeth, like a wolfhound or a striking snake.

Zazara cried out briefly as Gorge clamped his bite down into the Riever's neck. He shook, but Gorge would not let go. Zazara convulsed. Sesto watched with total revulsion and a rising terror. He saw little, macabre details. Gorge's thin, pale frame was at odds with his grossly swollen pot-belly. Zazara's feet twitched because he was actually held off the ground by Gorge's great strength.

Gorge let the Riever go, and Zazara collapsed. Blood ran down the governor's chin. The guards picked up Zazara's corpse and threw it with the others.

'Better,' said Gorge, his words slurred by the great teeth that pushed out his lips. 'Quickly, the other now. The noble one.'

Outnumbered as he was, Sesto could not just look on any more. Two guards were dragging Roque to the governor. Gripping his sabres tightly, Sesto backed up to crash open the doors.

He was struck such a blow from behind that he burst the doors open anyway, and sprawled onto the floor. He'd lost his grip on both the swords. When he reached out to snatch at one, a black boot pressed it firmly to the flags.

Ferrol stood over him. 'One woke early,' he said.

'I had a notion that one had not supped as much of the red lotus as the rest,' murmured Gorge. He smiled down at Sesto and the smile was terrible. 'Welcome to the feast, gentleman. I will be with you shortly.'

Gorge turned away and woke Roque with a sniff of the crystal bottle. The master-at-arms jolted awake, and struggled at once with the men holding him. They kept him pinned tightly.

Gorge yanked Roque's head over by the hair, and lunged at his throat. Roque howled as the monster's bite ripped into his neck.

But the feasting did not go as before. Gorge suddenly lurched away, retching and spitting, coughing blood out onto the floor. The men released Roque and he fell to his knees, clutching at his wounded throat.

'What is it? My lord?' Ferrol asked, hurrying to Gorge's side.

'This one has filth in his blood! Vile pestilence! Like sour milk or turned wine!' Gorge retched again, and great measure of noxious blood splattered across the tiles.

All attention was on the governor. Sesto reached out again for the fallen sabre.

'You should be careful who you bite,' mocked a voice from the shadows. Like a phantom, Sheerglas melted into the lamplight, his black robes around him like a piece of the night itself.

Gorge turned to face him. His men drew their rapiers.

'I could smell you in the town,' said Sheerglas. 'Your stink is everywhere. It has been hard, hasn't it? Thirsty times for you and your little coterie of servants.'

'Who are you?' Gorge asked.

'One who knows,' replied the master gunner. 'How long have you ruled here, demon-kin? Longer than any other colonial governor, I'll be bound. Those portraits in the hall. They're not your forebears, are they? They're you in other ages. You, and your legion of consorts.'

Sheerglas took a step forward, and some of the guards moved in around him. Sesto heard several of them growl like dogs facing off a rival male.

'It must have been so easy,' Sheerglas murmured, keeping his gaze on Gorge. 'A constant traffic of merchants and visitors, a town packed full of strangers. Every ship that came brought fresh liquor to quench you. But the traffic stopped, and you were forced to break your own rules. You had to find your nourishment from the local population exclusively. And my, your thirst

has left them weak and drained. Much longer, and Porto Real would have started to die. Hurrah, then, for a ship! Fresh blood at last.'

Gorge has stopped spitting blood out. He raised a bony finger and pointed at Sheerglas. 'Kill him,' he said.

The guards rushed Sheerglas.

Sesto leapt up, recovered both sabres, and ran to Roque, who was kneeling still, and shaking with pain. But he had seen the business well enough.

'Can you stand?' Sesto asked.

Roque snatched one of the sabres from Sesto and stumbled determinedly towards Gorge. Sesto ran with him. They hacked their blades into the backs of the two guards who had remained at the governor's side. Death blows.

But they didn't die.

They turned, eyes dark beneath the brims of their silver comb helmets, and lashed their rapiers at Roque and Sesto.

Somehow, Sheerglas had not fallen under the weight of the men who had rushed him. Indeed, like a shadow, he seemed to separate himself from them, sending several tumbling to the ground. He had drawn no weapons. A bladesman rushed him, and Sheerglas sidestepped, catching the wrist of the thrusting sword-arm and breaking the elbow joint with a savage upward blow of his other hand. The guard screamed and fell back, and Sheerglas took the Estalian rapier from his hand, drifting around like smoke to engage three more of the black-garbed soldiers. Sparks flew from the flickering blades.

'Their heads!' Sheerglas yelled above the din of steel. 'You cannot slay them but you take their heads off their shoulders!'

Sesto, driven back almost to the door, parried the whipping strikes of the guard, and dodged aside as sprightly as he could. The guard's sword tip struck the wooden door and stuck for a second.

Sesto whirled and parted his neck. The man fell. There was a sharp stench of burning. By the time the body hit the ground, it was nothing but boots and rotting black clothes and a rusty comb morion filled with dust.

Half revolted and half delighted, Sesto ran forward and lopped the head off the guard engaging Roque. Again, brimstone corruption seared the air as the man became ashes.

'My thanks,' said Roque. Together, they turned and laid into the soldiers attacking Sheerglas. The master gunner had already dispatched two of them. 'Keep them busy,' he hissed. Before Sesto could question the remark, Sheerglas had again flickered out of view, slipping into the shadows. He reappeared like a swirl of mist in front of Gorge. Sheerglas tossed away his borrowed sword and threw himself at the governor. They grappled furiously. Sesto heard the devilish snarling again.

He and Roque were miserably hard pressed. Five guardsmen still remained, including Ferrol. Sesto was not the greatest swordsman in the world, and Roque was slowed by his injury. Only fury and fear kept them fighting the blades away. Roque managed to turn a rapier aside and sweep his sabre into a throat. Another of Gorge's deathless followers found the dust of the grave at last. But now Ferrol was on to Roque and driving him back.

Sheerglas and Gorge struggled on. With inhuman force, Gorge threw the master gunner across the hall and he crashed into some of the trestles, shattering dishes and cascading platters onto the floor. He leapt straight back up, vaulting into the air so his black robes billowed out like a bat's wings, and came tearing back down onto Gorge, throwing him sideways. The governor's pale body demolished another table and overturned two chairs.

Gorge recovered as swiftly as Sheerglas had done, and pounced at the master gunner. The leap was far further than any mortal man could have managed. He tore into Sheerglas, fangs wide, and brought him over into another row of feast tables. Bottles smashed, wood splintered. A pewter beaker clattered to the floor and rolled away.

Sesto cried out as a blade ripped across the back of his hand, and another tore a long gash in his cheek. He parried furiously. Roque and he could not hold the swordsmen off any longer.

Sheerglas threw Gorge over onto his back, and sprang on him, pinning him for a second.

'Bastard!' Gorge rasped.

'Fiend!' Sheerglas replied. He seized a snapped leg strut from one of the broken trestles, and rammed it down into Gorge's chest with both hands.

Gorge screamed. His mouth opened so wide, his lips tore. Poisonous, rotten light shone out of his mouth, out of his eyes and out from around the stake through his chest. He thrashed violently. Then, in a flash of flame like a misfiring cannon, he exploded and disintegrated.

One by one, the Estalian guards burst apart like smoke, their empty clothing and armour falling to the floor. Ferrol was the last to go.

Silence. Nothing, but the smell of mausoleum dust.

Roque and Sesto backed away, panting. They looked at Sheerglas. He rose to his feet, and let ash spill out from between his fingers.

'It's done,' he said. 'Take the bottle there and wake the others.'

Roque limped to the table where Gorge's crystal bottle stood and picked it up. He looked at Sheerglas for a long moment, and then hobbled out of the room.



SESTO FOLLOWED Sheerglas out into the entrance hall.

'We owe you thanks,' he said. The master gunner shrugged.

'I say it was lucky that you came ashore tonight. Lucky you picked a straw. You don't often leave the ship, do you?' Sesto asked.

'Once in a while,' said Sheerglas.

'Why tonight?'

'Same as all of us. I was in search of clean drinking.'

He looked back at Sesto and gestured to the bloody gash on his cheek.

'You should bind that.'

'It's only a flesh wound.'

'I know. But it's also tempting.'

Sheerglas walked away. In the great mirrors of the hallway, Sesto saw only himself reflected. ❖

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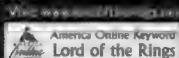
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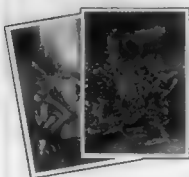


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CRIMSON-NIGHT

A DOOM EAGLES STORY BY JAMES SWALLOW

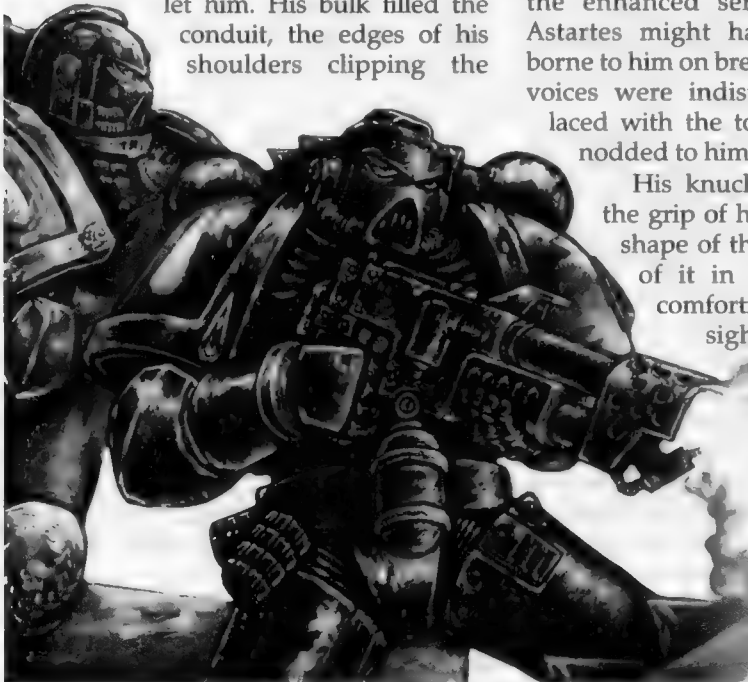
THE SEWER'S awful stench would have crippled a normal man with stomach-knotting nausea. It was a heady, foul cocktail of repellent, putrid matter, stagnant water and base stinks that signalled ripe decay.

Tarikus rose from his hands and knees where he had slipped into the sluggish embrace of the liquid effluent, and spat out the matter that had choked his mouth. The gobbet impacted the hard-packed bricks of the sewer tunnel wall with a wet slap; something small and chitinous, an insect scavenger he had almost swallowed, skittered away. He glanced backward, in the dimness catching the merest glint of metal from his armour, the paldrons and plates piled perhaps a quarter-league behind him, at the mouth of the access channel. Tarikus shook off the oily remnants of the muck and came up as far as the tunnel confines would let him. His bulk filled the conduit, the edges of his shoulders clipping the

bricks, his head forced down into a cocked angle. Even bent at the knees, it was all the Space Marine could do to fit his mass into the narrow passageway. Had he still been clad in his ceramite armour, he would have been wedged like a bolt shell jammed in a cannon breech after just a handful of paces. In his service to the Golden Throne, Tarikus had lost count of the number of Light-forsaken worlds he had fallen upon in the name of the Emperor, carrying the savagery and the cold fury of the Doom Eagles with him; and if his captain wished it, he would venture on and fight naked, with tooth and nail if that were to be the order of the day.

He spat and took a measured breath, concentrating for a moment, casting his hearing forward. Beyond the drips and spatters of falling water, past the slow slopping current of effluent, there were voices: faint sounds that someone without the enhanced senses of the Adeptus Astartes might have missed, murmurs borne to him on breaths of reeking air. The voices were indistinct, ephemeral, but laced with the touch of terror. Tarikus nodded to himself. He was close now.

His knuckles whitened around the grip of his bolt pistol, the solid shape of the gun and the weight of it in his fist familiar and comforting. Bringing it up to sight along the stubby barrel, he pushed forward, the rhythm of his footfalls sending ripples out before him, rings of liquid catching the faint glow of organic biolumines set into the tunnel roof. As Tarikus walked,



he strained to catch a sound from his quarry, some random noise that might give away its position and alert him, but he heard nothing, only the pitiable crying of its victims. No matter, the Marine told himself, there can be no other way out of this stinking warren. He's in there.

After a hundred more steps, the tunnel suddenly ballooned out into a circular atrium, an open flood chamber fed by a dozen more channels, each of them – unlike this one – blocked by a heavy iron grate. Tarikus scanned them in an eye-blink: not one had been forced open. As he had planned, the foe had been caught in his lair and trapped there. Tarikus hesitated a moment, licking at the sickly air. In the near-absolute darkness down here even his abhuman eyes strained to make out anything more than gross shapes, and his scent senses were fogged with the sewer's fetor. With a hiss of effort, Tarikus leapt from the mouth of the channel and dropped the seven metres to the chamber floor, the wet crash of his landing sending a surge of liquid roiling away. The moans he could hear jumped an octave. He could see people arranged like some grotesque exhibition in the chamber's centre, each in a box-like cage, piled randomly atop one another. A tiny flicker of child-memory blinked through Tarikus's mind: a nest of building blocks, a tottering tower built by small hands towards the sky.

In that second, the foe exploded from beneath the knee-deep fluid, a massive man-form spitting a reeking rain out behind it. Tarikus reacted with impossible speed, the bolt pistol turning to target, barrel winking like a blinded eye. The Marine's finger tightened and rounds screamed from the gun, finding purchase in the creature's chest – impossibly, ineffectually, bursting through it to spark away into the walls. Tarikus ducked as the heavy head of a massive hammer hummed through the air. A split-second too late, he realised the blow had not been aimed at his skull; the arcing trajectory of the hammer dipped down and caught him squarely on the forearm. The impact knocked the gun from his hand and it

vanished into the dark, claimed by the murk with a hollow splash. The foe pressed the attack, emboldened by disarming the Space Marine, looping the hammer around for a crushing stroke. As it strode towards him, the Doom Eagle caught the glitter of a lengthy sliver probe emerging from his assailant's other palm. Tarikus let him come on, let himself be pushed back toward the wall. As he retreated, he used his free hand to shrug a metallic tube from a strap on his wrist. Consciously willing his optic nerves to contract, he thumbed a stud at one end of the tube. With the brilliant fury of a supernova, a sputtering blaze of light erupted from the flare rod, filling the chamber with shuddering, actinic colour. The caged ones screamed, their faces caught in a frieze of cold white. Tarikus's eyes were fixed on the enemy before him, the foe revealed at last before the flare's illumination.

It stood a metre or so higher than he, clad in shrouds of rust-pocked armour, the broad feet anchored in the churning pool of effluent, the great mailed fists thrown up to protect its head, and the head itself concealed behind a helmet with dark eyes and the fierce grin of a breath grille. Except for its crimson hue, it was the virtual double of the armour Tarikus had discarded at the tunnel entrance, and staring back at him from its breastplate was the twin-headed eagle of the Imperium of Man.



BROTHER-SERGEANT Tarikus first cast eyes on the planet Merron as the Thunderhawk made a sharp roll to port. The craft turned inbound toward the starport – the barren desert world's only link to the greater galaxy beyond – and Merron's rumpled orange geography presented itself to the Space Marine. He gave it a practiced survey; there was just one large conurbation, toward which they were flying, and the

rest of the land as far as Tarikus's eyes could see appeared to be nothing more than a great web-work of ruddy-coloured scars.

'Open-cast mines,' said a voice beside him. 'Merron is rich in iridium.'

'Indeed?' Tarikus said mildly. 'Thank you for telling me, Brother Korica. Having ignored Captain Consultus's briefing this morning, I of course knew nothing of that.' He turned to give Korica a level stare.

The younger Marine blinked. 'Ah, forgive me, sergeant. I had not meant to imply you were ill-informed about our new garrison posting.'

Tarikus waved a dismissive hand. 'You need not prove your eagerness by reciting the captain's words, lad. Sufficient enough that you have committed them to memory.'

'Lord,' Korica said carefully.

The sergeant allowed himself a small smile. 'You are ready for a new world's challenge and that speaks well of you, Korica. That is why you were promoted from novice rank to the status of battle-brother with such rapidity... but this is not a place where we will find combat awaiting us. Merron is a way-station garrison, somewhere to re-arm and lick our wounds while we watch the Emperor's mines for him.'

'But if that were so, why not use the Imperial Guard to protect it? Are not we more valuable elsewhere?' There was a hint of wounded pride in the youth's voice.

'Mere men? Ha! Iridium attracts the greed of weaker souls like a candle does moths. We could not expect mere men to stand sentinel over it, nor expect them to repel any of the warp-cursed traitors who prey on the Imperium's riches.'

The Thunderhawk rumbled through a pocket of turbulence and Tarikus gave a curt shake of his head. 'No, only the Adeptus Astartes can truly place duty before base desire.' The disappointment on Korica's face was clear as day, and Tarikus waved him away. 'Fear not, lad. If the Corrupted return to this world as they have in the past, we'll be in the fray soon enough.'

The younger Marine looked downcast and Tarikus watched him for a moment. So raw, so untried, he thought, was I ever the same as he? He had not exaggerated when he praised Korica for his swift rise to full status as a Doom Eagle, but still Tarikus regretted that such a promotion had been necessary. On the ice planetoid Kript his company had met an overwhelming force of rot-souled Traitor Marines and lost fully a quarter of their number. Although the enemy had been routed, the blood cost they exacted was paid back with new men, new brothers advanced from the scout squads. Under Tarikus's direct command, Korica, and with him Brother Mykilus and Brother Petius, were among many newly fledged Doom Eagles. Tarikus gave himself a moment to remember his fallen comrades; they had met death at last on Kript's airless plains, and gone to him willingly with the blood of the impure on their hands. The sergeant had personally recovered a relic from the field of battle, the shattered blade of a chainsword that was now a memorial to one of his brothers. When his time came, Tarikus hoped that the Emperor would grant him so perfect an ending.



THEY RODE OUT across the blasted ferrocrete plain of the port in a line of Rhinos, bikes and speeders, carrying at the head the metallic banner of their standard. From his vantage point at the hatch of his squad's transport, at the rear of the procession, Tarikus nodded at the clean dispersal and formation of the vehicles. Before him, the full might of the entire third company was spread, a glittering steel parade of tactical, assault and terminator squads – a suitable first impression for the Doom Eagles to make on their inaugural posting to Merron.

His gaze wandered to a force of vessels clustered at the southern quadrant of the airfield. They too were Thunderhawk transports, but wine-dark in colour where

Doom Eagle craft were gunmetal silver. Their brooding livery looked like old, dried blood beneath the light of Merron's red sun. On their tail-planes they sported a disc-shaped sigil, a serrated circular blade kissed with a single crimson tear. The ships belonged to the Flesh Tearers, one of the smallest but most savage Chapters in the Adeptus Astartes.

Tarikus let his helmet optics bring them closer. Dozens of Marines were trooping aboard the Flesh Tearer craft while helots and workers, probably Merron locals, were busily loading cargo pods. As he watched, one of them slipped and dropped a case, the labourer's face a sudden mask of fear. A Marine walked to him and gestured roughly, the worker nodding frantically, thankful his mistake had not cost him his life. Tarikus looked away and dropped back into the Rhino.

'...nothing but carrion eaters,' Korica was saying to Mykilus. The other young Marine glanced up at the sergeant with a questioning gaze.

'Have you ever served with them, sir?' He jerked a thumb in the direction of the ships. 'There are rumours—'

'You're not a child, Brother Mykilus. Your time to give credence to fantasy tales is long gone,' Tarikus snapped.

'You deny the reports that they eat the flesh of the dead?' Korica pressed. 'Like the Blood Angels that spawned them, the Flesh Tearers feast on corpses—'

Tarikus took a heavy step forward and the rest of Korica's words died in his throat. 'What tales you may have heard are of little consequence, lad. Soon the Flesh Tearers will be gone and we will assume their garrison here. In the meantime, I expect you to contain your half-truths and speculations – clear?'

'Clear,' Korica repeated. 'I meant no disrespect.'

Tarikus was about to add something more, but without warning the Rhino suddenly lurched to the right, the forward quarter of the vehicle dipping sharply. Loose items flew across the cabin and only the sergeant's quick reflexes kept him upright. The Rhino skidded to a shuddering halt with a heavy iron clang.

An attack? Tarikus's first thoughts were of battle and he snapped out orders. The squad did as he commanded and boiled out of the vehicle in a swarm, bolters to the ready, scanning for an enemy. As Tarikus rounded the Rhino, Captain Consultus's voice crackled in his ear-bead, demanding a report.

Tarikus expected to see a smoking impact hole or the burnt traces of a lascannon hit, but the vehicle was undamaged. Instead, the very road the Rhino had been passing over had given way, a massive disc of ferrocrete cracked and distended into a shallow valley. 'The road, brother-captain, it seems to have collapsed...' Tarikus banged his mailed fist on the Rhino's hull and signalled the driver to put the vehicle in reverse, and the slab-sided machine began to edge backward. The sergeant frowned. The ground opening up beneath them was hardly an auspicious omen.

As the Rhino pulled back, a contingent of locals approached, cautious and fearful around the Space Marines, giving them a wide berth. They carried iron sheets and makeshift blocking to repair the collapse, and they went to work without speaking. Tarikus studied them for a moment to determine which one was the leader, then strode over to him. The man recoiled, his hands fluttering over his chest like birds.

'You,' Tarikus said. 'How did this happen?'

The man blinked fear-sweat from his eyes. 'B-by your leave, Lord Muh-Marine,' he stuttered. 'The airfield here, it was built over the old quarter. The cesspools are still beneath our, uh, feet. Sometimes, subsidence...' He trailed off, his frayed nerves robbing him of any more speech.

Tarikus looked past him. Some of the workers were covering the centre of the new crater with a rough cloth, trying to conceal something and making a poor try at it. 'You there, hold!'

The man reached out to touch Tarikus's armour and thought better of it, drawing back his hand as if it had been burnt. The Doom Eagle ignored him and stepped forward; the Merrons scattered like

frightened dogs. Tarikus ripped up the cloth with one hand and peered into the crater. Where the road surface had sunk into a dark chasm, a small void had been cut into the old sewers below. From the hole a dozen scents assaulted the Marine, but one came to him with the cold familiarity borne from a thousand battlefields. In the cesspool beneath the road were the naked forms of two corpses, pale and drawn, bleached by months of discorporation. 'What depravity is this?' Tarikus boomed, turning to face the Merrons. 'Answer me!'

'Don't concern yourself, Doom Eagle.' The words buzzed over the general channel of his helmet communicator, and Tarikus looked up to see who had spoken. Six Flesh Tearers had arrived, the black and red of their armour shining darkly.

'Concern?' Advancing on the Marine who had addressed him, Tarikus's voice was almost a snarl. 'Who are you to decide what should concern me?'

The Flesh Tearer removed his helmet and placed it under the crook of his arm, a casual gesture but one calculated to show Tarikus the skull painted on his shoulder plate and the rank insignia he bore. 'I am Gorn, Brother-Captain of the Flesh Tearers 4th company. I command the Marine garrison on Merron,' and here he hesitated, showing a little flash of teeth in a feral smile, 'At least until the end of this day.'

'My apologies, brother-captain. I did not recognise you.' Inwardly, Tarikus fumed at his own indiscretion.

Gorn made a dismissive gesture. 'No matter, sergeant. We will handle this.' The captain directed his men into the crater.

'If I may ask, what transpired here?' Tarikus pressed. 'I will have to make a report to my commander.'

'A report, of course,' said Gorn, lacing the comment with barely concealed disdain. 'There have been minor incidents of unrest in the city, which we recently suppressed. This-' he pointed at the crater, '-is no more than a sad reminder of the same, most likely a few misguided fools who took their own lives in a death-pact. Nothing more.' Gorn laid a level

gaze on Tarikus. Clearly, the conversation had come to an end, as far as the company commander was concerned.

Tarikus glanced back at the Rhino. Korica had arranged the squad to remount the transport and stood waiting for him to return. 'By your leave, then, brother-captain.'

Gorn nodded. 'Of course, Brother-Sergeant...?'

'Tarikus, lord.'

'Tarikus. Tell Consultus I will receive him in the garrison tower within the hour.'

'As you wish, lord.'

Am I a mere messenger now, Tarikus wondered as he walked away? Korica seemed about to speak as he boarded the Rhino, but Tarikus silenced him with a glare. 'Get us out of here. Make haste to rejoin the column or else I'll see you carry this heap of pig-iron into town.' The sergeant regretted the sharp words almost as soon as he had said them; his anger was at the arrogant Gorn, not his own men.



CAPTAIN CONSULTUS said nothing as Tarikus relayed the details of the incident, the two of them standing in the stone annex before the Space Marine garrison. The sergeant kept his eyes straight ahead as he spoke, but even in his peripheral vision he noted a stiffening of Consultus's jaw as Gorn's name was mentioned. Tarikus had served under the captain for over a century, and knew that this subtle sign indicated an irritation that in other men would have manifested as a shouting rage.

'Strange that he and I should cross paths after so long,' the officer mused. 'I had not thought I'd see Gorn again in this life. I'd thought the Flesh Tearers would have torn themselves apart by now.'

'This Gorn, brother-captain - you fought with him?'

Consultus nodded. 'Our Chapters met briefly on Kallern. You know of it?'

'The Kallern Massacres.' Tarikus recalled the records of the conflict from the indoctrination sessions of his training. 'Millions dead. Terror weapons unleashed in untold numbers.'

'And the Flesh Tearers in the middle of it all. What they did there earned them the attention of the Inquisition, from that day to this. They embrace the tactics of the berserker, rending and destroying all that stand in their way – enemy and ally alike. If I could command it, I would never place Doom Eagles alongside them, even in the darkest of days.'

Tarikus shifted uncomfortably. 'The brothers... tell stories about them.' The sergeant was almost ashamed to give voice to the thought.

'There are always stories,' Consultus said simply. 'The trick is to know if they are just stories.'

The door before the two Doom Eagles opened to reveal the chamber beyond, silencing any more conversation. A group of Flesh Tearers stepped past, among them a blunt-faced codicier. 'Captain Gorn will see you now,' he said, his grey eyes flicking over Tarikus's face. The sergeant said nothing, wondering if the psyker had heard every word they had uttered; as if in reply, the codicier gave Tarikus the smallest hint of a scowl.

Consultus entered the chamber, beckoning Tarikus with him. The exchange of commands was a formal ritual, and it required witnesses. Inside, Gorn was overseeing another Flesh Tearer as the Marine removed the company standard from the wall. This was a solemn duty, the banner a sacred artefact that no helot would dare lay hands upon. As the blood-red pennant was taken down, Tarikus heard the Flesh Tearers murmur a prayer to their Chapter's progenitor, Lord Sanguinius.

The two commanders met each other's gaze. 'Consultus.'

'Gorn.'

'My men are ready to take our leave of this sandpit. I can think of no better a company to take our place here than yours.'

If Consultus noticed the derisive tone in Gorn's voice, he gave no sign. 'The Doom Eagles will strive to be worthy of the honour of this posting.'

'Indeed.' Gorn removed a long ivory rod from a small altar before him. 'This token was granted by Merron's governor, as a symbol of our command here. Accept it from me and you will be this world's new defender.' He held out the rod to Consultus like an unwanted gift.

'A moment,' said Consultus coolly. 'First, I would address the report Brother Tarikus brought to me. These "uprisings" of which you spoke.'

Gorn grimaced. 'The report, yes. It is, as I told the sergeant, of no matter. A circumstance we dealt with. It will not trouble you.'

'All the same, I would have a full accounting of it before you leave.'

The Flesh Tearer commander gave a sideways glance at the other Marine, in shared, unspoken scorn at the Doom Eagle's expense. 'As you wish. Sergeant Noxx will see to it.'

'Lord.' Noxx spoke for the first time.

'Now,' Gorn continued, still proffering the ivory wand, 'For the Glory of Terra, I transfer command of the Merron garrison to Captain Consultus of the Doom Eagles. Do you accept?'

Consultus took the rod. 'In the Emperor's name, I accept command of the Merron garrison from Captain Gorn of the Flesh Tearers.'

'So witnessed,' Tarikus and Noxx spoke together.

Gorn's mouth twisted in self-amusement as he took the banner from Noxx. 'You'll find this an agreeable assignment, Consultus.' He patted the chamber's only other item of furniture, a simple carved chair. 'This seat is most comfortable.'

Tarikus frowned; from any other man, such a thinly veiled insult would have had him knocked to the stone floor. Gorn and Noxx left, the heavy ironwood door slamming shut behind them.

'He mocks us,' Tarikus grated. 'Forgive me sir, but by what right—'

'Keep yourself in check, Tarikus,' Consultus said mildly, the words instantly stopping the sergeant in his tracks. 'You're not a novice any more. Quell your enmity and save it for the foe. Let Gorn and his men play at their games of arrogance. They have little else.'

Tarikus stiffened. 'As you wish, brother-captain. Your orders?'

Consultus weighed the ivory token in his fist, then handed it to the sergeant. 'Place this somewhere out of sight. We have no need to validate our command here with the display of vulgar trinkets. All of Merron will understand, the dedication of the Doom Eagles is symbol enough of our devotion to the Emperor.'

'So witnessed,' Tarikus repeated.



THE GARRISON TOWER stood ten storeys tall, dwarfing the largest of the other buildings in Merron's capital, and beneath the surface were a dozen basements and sanctums carved from the sandstone. It was cool and damp down here, a comparative comfort to the uncompromising heat above. Tarikus made a circuit of the lower levels. Squads of Flesh Tearers were everywhere, completing their final preparations for departure, securing weapons for transit and storage. He checked here and there on the numerous Doom Eagles mingling among them, setting up storage dumps for ammunition and equipment. The groups of Marines moved around each other in a controlled dance of parade-ground efficiency, with little interaction.

Tarikus secured the rod in a weapons locker, and turned to discover he was being watched. A Merron male, half-hidden in the shadows, gave a start as he realised he had been discovered.

'Are you lost?' Tarikus asked.

The Merron's head darted back and forth, clearly weighing his chances at running away.

'Speak,' the sergeant said carefully.

The man flinched at the word and dropped to his knees, hands coming up to protect his face. 'Lord Marine, please do not kill me! I have a wife and child!'

Irritation flared in Tarikus. 'Get up, and answer my question.' He did so, and Tarikus felt a flash of recognition. 'Wait, you led the work crew at the starport.'

'I am Dassar, if it pleases you, sir.' The man was trembling, terror-struck in the Doom Eagle's presence. 'I beg you, I was just curious... about your kind.'

Tarikus had often seen common men cower before him. It was the manner of a Space Marine to expect this, as the greater populace of the Imperium – especially on backwater medieval worlds such as this – saw the Adeptus Astartes as the living instruments of the Emperor's divine will; but something sat wrongly with Dassar's behaviour. The Merron's fear was borne not from awe and veneration, but from outright terror. 'I am Sergeant Tarikus of the Doom Eagles. You have nothing to fear from me.'

'Y-yes, honoured sergeant.' Dassar licked his lips. 'But, p-please, sir, may I leave?'

'What are you afraid of, little man?'

At these words, the Merron began to weep. 'Oh, Great Terra protect me! Lord Tarikus, spare me! My family will have nothing if I am taken, their lives will be forfeit.'

Tarikus felt a mixture of confusion and disgust at Dassar's craven display. 'You are a helot in the service of the Emperor! What cause would I have to take your life?'

Dassar's sobbing paused. 'You... you are of The Red...' he said hesitantly, as if the statement would answer all questions. 'You are predators and we are prey...'

'You talk in riddles.' Tarikus bent down and placed his face by Dassar's. 'What is this "Red" you speak of?'

'The children sing the rhymes,' Dassar hissed, 'Here come The Red, they stalk while you sleep. Here come The Red, your blood do they seek. Here come The Red, to your soul they lay claim, and

you'll never be seen in sunlight again.' He gingerly laid a finger on Tarikus's armour. 'Only the colour is different. We prayed we would be free of them, but now you have come as well, in numbers five-fold.'

Stone crunched underfoot behind him and Tarikus came up on his heel, whirling about. Framed in shadow, Sergeant Noxx pointed past him at the cowering servant.

'You, vassal! Where is that case of grenades I ordered you to find? Your lassitude will not be permitted!'

Dassar bolted away into the dark, calling over his shoulder. 'Of course, Lord Marine, I shall do as you order!'

Noxx gave Tarikus a hard look. 'These locals. They are a superstitious lot, brother-sergeant.'

'Indeed?'

Noxx nodded. 'They're full of naïve fables. I would pay them no mind.'

Tarikus cast a glance in the direction that Dassar has gone and then pushed past Noxx, back up toward the surface. 'I'll try to remember that,' he said.



NIGHTFALL ON Merron was a slow, languid process. Out on a long orbit around its huge red star, the planet had lengthy days far beyond those of Terran standard, and nights that were longer still. Tarikus watched the sky's gradual drift toward red-orange twilight through the window behind Captain Consultus, the colour shimmering off the shapes of a dozen armoured Space Marines outside as they drilled in tight-knit groups.

'You were right to bring this to me,' he said carefully, 'but Noxx is correct. I have examined the Adeptus Ministorum records of this world and its natives, and their culture is disposed toward myths and idolatry. The Ecclesiarchy allowed it to continue with guidance toward

veneration of the Golden Throne, but some anomalies of doctrine might still exist.'

Tarikus shifted slightly. 'Captain, that may be so, but this helot, I saw nothing but absolute dread in his eyes. Reverence breeds a different kind of fear.' When Consultus gave no reply, he continued. 'A commissar once spoke to me of the Flesh Tearers's legacy of Sanguinius, of' – and here Tarikus had to force the words from his mouth – 'the curse of the Black Rage.'

'What you are insinuating borders on heresy, sergeant,' the captain stated coldly. 'You understand that?'

Tarikus found himself repeating Korica's words aboard the Rhino. 'I meant no disrespect.'

'I have seen the Flesh Tearers in their unbounded fury,' Consultus said quietly. 'They would take prisoners for interrogation, and we would never see them again. Once, I found a mass grave on the edge of my patrol zone, filled to the brim with enemy dead. I thought to check the bodies for any whom still lived, but there were none. Instead, I found men with hearts torn out by human teeth, bloodless and bone-white.'

An image of the corpses in the crater returned to Tarikus's mind. 'If the Merron people are being preyed upon by...' He paused for a moment. 'By someone, and the Imperium does not protect them from it, their faith in the Emperor's divinity may falter.'

Consultus nodded. 'There are always dark forces that seek uncertainties such as this. If they were to gain a foothold on Merron, the consequences could be disastrous. That shall not come to pass while we stand sentinel here.'

'Will the Inquisitors hear of this?'

The captain shook his head. 'This is a matter for the Adeptus Astartes. You, Tarikus, will take a few men and investigate these circumstances. I will have you put down this fable for all of Merron to see.'

'It will be my honour, captain.' The sergeant met his commander's gaze. 'I will follow this malfesance to its source.'

'I know you will, Tarikus. Wherever it takes you.'



THEY FOUND THE body after only an hour of searching. Dassar's thin screech cut through the blood-warm air and brought Tarikus and Korica running, to where he stood flanked by Mykilus and Petius. Between the hulking forms of the two armoured Space Marines, Dassar looked waif-like by comparison, a child's crude sketch of a man against the brutal shapes in silver-grey ceramite. The servant had panicked when Tarikus had ordered him to accompany them, but it was the Merron's reluctant direction that had brought them here, to a landscape of wreckage and broken stone on the city's outskirts. Brother Petius raised his faceplate to the sergeant and flicked a glance at the ground.

'Elderly male, no clothing or identifying marks. I'd estimate he's been dead for two standard days.'

Tarikus accepted Petius's report with a nod. The young Marine's skills with matters of the dead were trustworthy; he would one day become a fine Apothecary for the chapter. 'Show me.' Tarikus stepped around the shuddering form of Dassar and peered at what they had discovered.

'We found him concealed beneath some rubble,' began Mykilus. 'Not too well hidden, either. I suspect he was meant to be found, sir.'

The sergeant dropped to one armoured knee to get a closer look at the corpse. Like the bodies he had seen in the sinkhole, the frail old man's papery skin was fish-belly white and anemic. 'Drained of his vital fluids,' Tarikus murmured. 'Exsanguinated...'

'It is as he said,' Korica indicated Dassar, 'these ruins around the airstrip are a warren of tunnels. The ideal place to dispose of a body.'

'The others were found like this?' Tarikus asked.

Dassar nodded slowly. 'Y-yes, Lord Marine. Sometimes weeks, even months after they go missing from their homes.'

Mykilus's brow furrowed. 'Are all you Merrons sheep? You did nothing about these abductions, you did not speak of them to the garrison commander?'

After a long moment, Dassar spoke again, his voice thick with fatigue. 'We were told to keep our petty problems to ourselves.'

Tarikus stood up and gestured to Korica. 'Wrap the body in Dassar's sandcloak and take it back to the Rhino. We will treat the dead with the respect they are due. How was he killed, Petius?'

'Look here, sir.' The Marine pointed at a circular wound on the body's chest. 'A puncture point, just beneath the heart. This poor fool was sucked dry through some kind of instrument, perhaps a metallic proboscis or tube. I believe he was alive and conscious at the time.' Petius removed a thin scalpel blade from a pack on his belt and picked at something on the dead man's flesh.

Dassar turned away and retched into the scrub. 'Oh, Emperor, deliver us from this evil, save our brother Lumen—'

'You knew this man?' Korica asked.

'The metalsmith's father-in-law,' Dassar choked. 'Taken last month during the two-moon festival.'

'Whatever kills these people does not murder before it is ready,' said Tarikus. 'How many others are still missing?'

'A-a dozen, perhaps more...'

'Then, where are they if they are not already dead?' asked Mykilus.

Tarikus nudged a loose stone with his broad, metalshod foot. 'Beneath us...'

'No one ventures into the tunnels!' said Dassar sharply, 'A foetid place running with pestilence. Any man who enters would surely sicken and die!'

'Any man,' echoed Tarikus. 'But we are not mere men.'

'Brother-sergeant,' said Petius, a warning in his voice, 'I have something.' He held up a tiny sliver of metallic material that glistened in the fading daylight. Tarikus examined it closely; such an artefact would surely be imbued with the despair of so terrible and tragic a death – a relic well suited to be taken to the chapter's Reclusium on Gathis when this mission was at an end.

Mykilus intoned a prayer to the Machine God and gently waved his auspex over the fragment. 'A piece of ceramite,' he pronounced, 'old and corroded. It seems crimson in colour.'

'The Red!' Dassar husked, but the Marines did not answer him. Their enhanced senses caught the sound of tracks long before the servant's human ears registered the approach of a vehicle.

A Razorback tank in Flesh Tearer livery rolled into view between piles of rubble, which had once been brick-and-mortar buildings in the old quarter. The vehicle halted and for a moment there was silence. With a squeak of poorly maintained hinges, the tank's upper hatch opened and a trio of Marines exited. Dassar shrank back, shifting to hide himself behind Petius.

'Ho, Brother-Sergeant Tarikus.' Tarikus recognised Noxx's voice.

'Noxx,' he replied with a nod. 'What brings you here?'

The Flesh Tearer sergeant looked around. 'I could ask you the same.'

Tarikus was suddenly very conscious that Noxx and his men were carrying their bolters in battle-ready stances. The same awareness seemed to flicker out to Korica, Mykilus and Petius, and from the corner of his vision, Tarikus saw them shift their hands close to the triggers of their own guns. 'We are conducting an investigation.'

'For another of your reports?' Noxx said archly. 'The Doom Eagles must be a well-documented Chapter indeed.' When Tarikus did not rise to his barb, the Flesh Tearer indicated the nearby airstrip. 'In answer to your question, I am supervising

the transfer of this vehicle to one of our Thunderhawks.'

'Through a debris zone?' said Mykilus.

Noxx's words became a snarl. 'Not that it is any concern of yours, whelp, but this route is quicker than the paved road. After all, we are doing our best to remove ourselves from Merron as fast as we can.'

A sideways glance from Tarikus kept Mykilus from answering with an angry riposte. 'We need no assistance,' he said in a neutral voice.

One of the other Flesh Tearers spoke. 'What have you there?' He gestured toward the cloak-wrapped body. 'Another deader?'

'Nothing of consequence-' Tarikus began, but Dassar spat loudly behind him.

'Fiends! Eaters of men!' the bondman hissed, emboldened by the Doom Eagle's protection. 'Your time is at an end! Merron will fear you no more!'

Noxx gave a chug of harsh laughter. 'Careful, vassal. The Adeptus Astartes does not take kindly to insults from lesser men...'

Dassar began to speak again, but Petius cuffed him with the flat of his gauntlet and he fell to the ground. The Marine had saved his life; had the servant vented his hostility any further, Noxx's men would have been within their rights to discipline him as harshly as they saw fit.

'You should keep him quiet,' said the other Marine. 'They never spoke out of turn when we were in charge here.'

Tarikus took a menacing step forward. 'But you are not in charge here anymore. The Doom Eagles are Merron's protectors now, and the Emperor has duties for you elsewhere, Flesh Tearer.'

The sergeant's words brought the tension in the air to a knife-point. But after long moments, Noxx broke it with a nod to Tarikus. He ordered his men back aboard their tank, and the vehicle lumbered off, kicking up spurts of dust.



CONSULTUS'S RIGID expression did not alter as Tarikus relayed the discovery of the body to his commander. Only when he handed over the metal fragment did the sergeant see anything more than cold contemplation on his face. Finally, Consultus put the ceramite shard aside.

'Meaningless, Tarikus. If this is the best you can do, the chief librarian will laugh you out of the chambers.'

'I suspect Noxx and his men knew about the corpse before we did.'

'Conjecture. I cannot even begin to countenance the idea of placing doubt on a brother company without hard, irrefutable evidence.'

'They were goading us,' Tarikus said. 'I won't stand by and have my Chapter derided by carrion eaters'—

Consultus came to his feet with a snap of boots on stone. 'You forget your place, sergeant, for the second time today. Do you plan to make a habit of it?'

Tarikus felt his colour rise. 'No, brother-captain.'

'Good, because the last thing I want is for one of my most trusted squad leaders to begin behaving like the noviciates I put him in charge of, clear?'

'Clear, lord.'

The captain turned away. 'Night has fallen. You have until dawn to find something substantial, otherwise the Flesh Tearers will leave and this matter will be closed.'



TARIKUS STEPPED out into the Merron evening. The crimson glow of the sunset still lingered at the horizon, and above, the largest of the planet's moons was full and gibbous, hanging in mute judgement over the city. The sergeant walked the perimeter of the garrison block, along cloisters thick with shadow. Other Doom Eagles passed him by, leaving

Tarikus alone with his thoughts. It was the nature of a Space Marine to be instilled with supreme self-belief, and like any other member of the Adeptus Astartes, Tarikus knew with all his heart that they were the strongest, the most dedicated, the most fearless warriors in the Emperor's arsenal.

Despite their arrogance and savagery, Tarikus had a grudging respect for the Flesh Tearers. They had weathered more than their share of misfortune and hardship; from the jungle hell of their homeworld, they numbered merely four full companies, and their only starship was an ancient hulk crowded with ill cared-for equipment, like the patchwork Razorback he'd seen earlier. They were Brother Marines, and Tarikus found the idea that members of the Legion Astartes would stoop to such pointless barbarity as preying on innocent civilians disgusting. It was his duty, he decided, not just to his Chapter and to the Merrons, but to the Flesh Tearers and to the Emperor, to end the circle of suspicion without delay.

'Tarikus.' The voice cut through his musings. He became aware of three figures standing around him in the darkness, their blood- and black-coloured armour blending into the night.

'Captain Gorn: I thought you were at the airstrip.'

'I have other matters to attend to.'

The sense of threat from the ruins rushed back to him. 'What of them?'

'It has come to my attention that certain... rumours are being circulated. This displeases me.'

Tarikus said nothing; although he could not see their faces, he could taste the familiar scent-trace of Noxx and one of his men from the Razorback.

Gorn continued: his voice coloured with annoyance 'We have had our fill of this worthless sand pile, sergeant, and we wish to leave it behind. It would not go well for our departure to be delayed by needless hearsay. Do you understand?'

'I believe so, brother-captain.'

'Then I hope for your sake I will hear no more of this unworthy prattle.'

Without another word, they left him there, turning over Gorn's cryptic half-threat in his mind; but then another voice called his name, and this one was screaming it, crying and shrieking into the moonlit night.



TARIKUS FOUND Dassar in a shuddering heap at the feet of Brother Mykilus, the Marine's face split with confusion over how he should deal with the wailing servant. Tarikus pulled him upright.

'What is wrong?'

Dassar's face was streaked with tears. 'My Lord Tarikus, I am undone! I came to you with the truth and now I have paid the price – they took them! They took my wife and my son!'

'He claims the Red abducted his family and dragged them into the sewers,' said Mykilus.

Tarikus's eyes narrowed. 'Summon Korica and Petius,' he told the Marine. 'Tell them to bring weapons for close-quarter combat.' As Mykilus did as he was ordered, Tarikus questioned Dassar. 'These tunnels, what do you know of them?'

'A web of sewers,' the man said between sobs, 'feeding to a central chasm. It was once an underground reservoir, but now it is barren.'

A lair, thought Tarikus. Like a trapdoor spider, the Red was hiding concealed in the stone tunnels – just as the Sergeant had begun to suspect.

'Mira and my boy Seni, they'll be killed! Please, I beseech you, save their lives!'

Tarikus looked up as Mykilus returned with the others. 'I have heard enough. This ends tonight.'

Korica handed him a loaded bolt pistol, and the four Space Marines advanced into the gloom.

MYKILUS USED a shaped charge to blow open a rusted manhole cover in the plaza near the garrison, and with Korica on point, the quartet dropped down into the foetid runnels beneath.

'The stench – I have never encountered the like before!' Petius gasped.

'Like a breath from a slaughterhouse,' said Korica with a grunt.

'Hold your chatter!' Tarikus barked. 'Look sharp! We can only guess at what we are facing.' He glanced up and down the tunnel they stood in: it was a wide pipe, a main tributary or flood channel.

After a few hundred strides, Korica pointed toward a small branch tunnel. 'Sergeant, see here. I believe this is one of the vents that joins the main chamber.'

'Too narrow for us,' noted Petius.

From behind him, Tarikus heard Mykilus give a growl of frustration. 'The auspex senses something, but I cannot interpret the runes...'

The squad halted, the echoes of their footfalls dying away. Over the licking of the effluent around them, Tarikus strained to listen. Dimly, he was aware of an organic rustling sound, like matted fur on cobbles.

'Above' – began Korica, leaning back to look at the tunnel ceiling. Without warning, a dozen bulky black shadows detached themselves from the crumbling bricks and fell across Korica's upper torso. The sewer was suddenly filled with high-pitched squeals as dozens of rat-like vermin bit into the Marine's armour, acidic saliva melting through the ceramite. Blinded, Korica squeezed the trigger on his bolter and the gun crashed into life, a fusillade of shells arcing from the muzzle as he twisted in place. The bolts sparked off the walls in brilliant red ricochets.

Tarikus leapt forward, shoving Petius aside as a round whined off the tip of his shoulder plate; the Marine was unhurt, but his Battle-Brother Mykilus reacted seconds slower than the veteran Tarikus, taking hits in his chest and thigh. Mykilus sagged, slipping down the curved wall.

Brother Korica gave a bubbling scream; some of the rat-things that swarmed over his chest plate had bored into his armour and were scratching and tearing at him from the inside. One of the rodents leapt at Tarikus, spitting venom, and he caught it in mid-jump, crushing the animal in his fist. For a moment, it hissed and snapped at him, and Tarikus saw the tell-tale signs of mutation and corruption across its form. The tiny body bulged and popped beneath his fingers like an overripe fruit.

Korica's bolter clicked empty and still the injured, maddened Doom Eagle swatted at himself with the inert weapon, desperately trying to pick off the darting, biting shapes. Dark arterial blood ran in thick streams from the joints in his armour.

Tarikus grabbed at Petius's weapon – a narrow-bore hand flamer – where it had fallen and trained it on his Brother Marine; the rat-beast's eyes had glowed with the same infernal hate that the sergeant had seen in the Traitors at Kript, and suddenly he had no doubt as to what quarry they were tracking. Korica seemed to sense his intentions and nodded his consent; Tarikus whispered a litany under his breath and pressed down the trigger stud, engulfing Korica and his myriad attackers in wreathes of glowing orange flame. The verminous creatures hissed and spat, catching ablaze and falling away from the Marine's armour. Korica shrugged off the licking fires, beating them out with his gloves, his breath coming in harsh wheezes. The Marine's skin was bloodied, burnt and cracked, but he lived.

'Thank you, brother-sergeant,' he coughed. 'Only the flamer's kiss can dislodge these warp-spawned abberants...'

'What were those creatures?' asked Petius.

'Mutants,' said Tarikus, handing back the flamer. 'The twisted lackeys of Chaos.'

Behind them, Mykilus gave a hollow groan. Petius went to his side. 'He's alive, but the bolter shells hit a primary artery. The bleeding must be staunched or he will perish.'

'Do it,' Tarikus snarled, removing his helmet. With the ease of hundreds of years of practice, the sergeant began to

divest himself of his armour.

'Sir, what are you doing?' Petius asked. 'You cannot think to—'

'You said yourself, the channel is too small for one of us. I must leave my armour here and venture on without it.'

'Let me come with you,' grated Korica, ignoring his injuries.

Tarikus shook his head. 'You are blinded and Mykilus will be lost without aid. You must carry him to the surface. I will see this through to its ending.' The Marine shrugged off his torso plates and stood, unadorned and ready. 'Get Mykilus to safety and inform Captain Consultus of the situation.'

Petius nodded. 'As you command, sergeant. Terra protect you.'

Gripping the bolt pistol in his hand, Tarikus pushed on into the narrow channel alone.



STARING BACK AT him from its breastplate was the twin-headed eagle of the Imperium of Man.

The shock of recognition sent a thrill of adrenaline through Tarikus; bare-chested and unarmed, he was face-to-face with a fully armoured, crimson-clad Space Marine, the unmistakable broad shoulders and the fearsome mask of the helmet pressing down on him. The light from the flare tube began to gutter out in pops and splutters of greenish-white chemical fire, and as it did the foe let out an echoing cry that was half-pain, half-rage.



TARIKUS STABBED the dying flare forward like a knife and connected with the Red Marine's torso – but instead of blunting itself on the

toughened ceramite exterior, the tube pierced the chest plate, flakes of metallic armour crumbling away under the impact. Like the fragment Brother Petius found, he realised. His surprise robbed him of the initiative, and the foe's hammer whistled through the foul air, catching Tarikus in the shoulder. The impact spun him about, and he stumbled, splashing through the muck in gouts of oily liquid. The sergeant's right arm went loose; the dislocated joint sang with pain, the edges of bone grinding together. Tarikus gave a bellow of anger as he dragged the limb back into place with a sickening crack. The hammer came out of the dimness at him once more, but this time Tarikus was ready and blocked it with a cross-handed parry. The slow, heavy weapon's path could not be quickly halted and it struck the wall, the head burying itself in the rotted bricks. The vague shape of the Red Marine pulled impotently at the handle, spitting out wordless, hollow noises of frustration.

'Woe betide!' Brother Tarikus answered with a battle-roar and leapt at his enemy with a powerful kick that shattered the Red Marine's greaves. The foe fell back, letting go of the hammer, and raised its hands in a poor approximation of a fighting stance. As he circled it, on some higher, analytical level, Tarikus's mind was marvelling at what he saw. What madness is this, he wondered? No Adeptus Astartes, not even the foul cohorts of the Traitor Legions would dare show such ineptness!

Tarikus saw an opening and took it, his fist striking his attacker's chest with such ferocity that the torso plate broke apart, crumbling like rotten pastry. The Imperial eagle sigil snapped under his knuckles, revealing itself as nothing more than painted glass. Tarikus reached inside the rent he'd made in the crimson armour and dug his sturdy fingers into the folds of flesh and clothing within. He felt thick blood ooze out around his wrist, heard a gasp of pain. The sergeant balled his free hand into a fist and struck the Red Marine across the helmet; the blow landed with a hollow ringing collision. His muscles bunching, Tarikus hit out again with all his

might and his backhand took the helm off his foe's head, arcing away to clatter against the walls.

Revealed within the armour was a pasty-skinned parody of a man, his face riven with blotches and his eyes sepulchral with hate. Across his brow was a livid brand: a grinning skull surrounded by an eight-pointed star. Exposed, he seemed pathetically small and weak, a faint shadow of Tarikus's rugged, broad form.

'Who are you?' Tarikus demanded, shaking him. 'Answer, you wretch!'

Above, the sergeant heard the cough of impact charges as the chamber roof gave way; stones crashed to the floor around him, but he did not spare them a glance.

'Talk, or I'll tear the truth from you!' His grip tightened, and the little man spat up thin, greenish-tinted blood.

When he finally spoke, it was in a fluid, gurgling murmur: 'Here come The Red, they stalk while you sleep. Here come The Red, your blood do they seek. Here come The Red, to your soul they lay claim, and you'll never be seen in sunlight again...'

The sergeant hesitated for a moment, then tore his hand from the little man's chest, ripping bone, lung and flesh out along with it. The ruined figure dropped away and sank into the torpid black water.



PETIUS FINISHED applying the salve to a small wound on Tarikus's face and pronounced him healthy. His Space Marine physiology was already flushing the toxins from the sewer out of his system, and the salve would help it in the process. He watched as the Merrons brought up the caged ones from the chamber, as men and women greeted their families with tears; some joyful at finding those they loved still alive, some weeping as bloated, pallid corpses were

hoisted to the surface. He noted with some small satisfaction that Dassar had been reunited with his wife and son; at least for the helot, the Emperor had moved through Tarikus this day to deliver him from his pain.

He rose to his feet as Captain Consultus approached, with Gorn and Noxx a step behind.

'Tarikus, you performed well. A citation may be in order.'

Gorn gave a reluctant nod of agreement. 'Perhaps so, brother-captain.'

'This is at an end, then?' he asked.

'It is,' said Consultus. 'When Petius returned to the garrison with news of what transpired, I asked Captain Gorn to lend us the arms of his Flesh Tearers.'

'It seemed a logical course of action,' noted Gorn.

Petius jerked a thumb at several impact craters nearby. 'We are storming the tunnels, flushing them out with flamers and plasma-fire. It is a nest of foulness and corruption down there.'

'The man,' Tarikus began. 'He wore our armour...'

'Not quite,' said Gorn, 'it was a well-crafted copy, but made from a poor ceramic compound. Not even strong enough to deflect a punch.'

'But it was similar enough to convince the Merrons.'

Consultus nodded his assent. 'He preyed on their fears to discredit the Flesh Tearers and the Adeptus Astartes.'

'To what purpose?' said Petius.

In reply, Noxx tossed a spherical white object at the youth, but Tarikus snatched it from the air before it reached him. It was a human skull, and etched into its bone were whorls and patterns of lines. The matrix of thin bands seemed to shimmer in the half-light, forming the shape of a many-angled star. 'Ask him,' said Noxx.

Gorn cocked his head and subvocalised a message into the com-net. 'Our transports are approaching orbit. By your leave, brother-captain, if you have no further use for us, the Flesh Tearers would quit this troublesome world.'

'Thank you for your assistance, Brother Gorn,' said Consultus, offering his hand. 'Perhaps we will meet again under better circumstances?'

'Perhaps,' Gorn replied, returning the gesture. He gave Tarikus a wary nod and walked away. Noxx followed and did not look back.

The Doom Eagle sergeant watched them go in silence.



TARIKUS FOUND himself in the company of his captain once again a few days later, as he completed his prayers after early morning firing rites.

'Brother-captain,' he began, 'have the tunnels been cleansed?'

'The taint of evil has been purged,' Consultus replied.

'Were all the missing civilians accounted for?' Tarikus said after a moment.

Consultus gave him a neutral look. 'We only found live victims in the cavern where you killed the cultist, the Red. There were several caches of bodies scattered around the sewer complex.'

'They were all killed in the same manner?' he pressed.

'Not all,' said the captain. 'A handful were found with different wounds.'

'In what way?'

'It is of little consequence now, Tarikus, but if you must know, there were some that sported torn, ragged wounds from claws and teeth. From human teeth.'

Despite himself, the sergeant felt a shudder of cold run along his spine. 'The Red killed only by draining blood. If he was not responsible, then who was?'

'Who indeed?' said the Captain as he walked away.

Tarikus looked up into the sky, where the crimson night was fading into dawn; if he had an answer to that question, he kept it to himself. ▼

TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT

THE TEN-TAILED CAT IN TALABHEIM, KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE CITY AS A GATHERING PLACE FOR *RACONTEURS* AND THE TELLERS OF *TALL TALES*.


THEY COME TO THE TEN-TAILED CAT FOR MANY REASONS, SOME TO BOAST OF THEIR EXPLOITS, SOME TO AMUSE AND ENTERTAIN, OTHERS TO UNBURDEN THEIR SOULS OR PASS ON *DIRE WARNINGS*...

The Artist's Tale

STORY: DARIUS HINKS • ART: ROMAN SIDOROV • LETTERS: FIONA STEPHENSON




...WHILE SOME COME SIMPLY TO LINE THEIR POCKETS.



AND WHAT WILL IT BUY YOU, FRIEND? A FEW FRIENDS FOR THE EVENING? THEY'LL SOON FORGET YOUR NAME ONCE THE MONEY IS GONE!



IF YOU'RE SO JEALOUS OF MY WINNINGS, WHY DON'T YOU JOIN US FOR A GAME?



OH, I HAVE MORE MONEY THAN I CAN COUNT, FRIEND, FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH, BUT IT CANNOT BUY BACK ALL THAT I HAVE LOST.

LET ME TELL YOU A TALE OF WEALTH, MY FRIEND... AND ITS TRUE COST.



'MY NAME IS HANS RAUSCHENBERG, AND ONCE I COULD HAVE BEEN THE GREATEST ARTIST IN ALL OF MIDDENHEIM.

'MY WORKS WERE HUNG IN THE HOMES OF THE CITY'S GREAT AND GOOD, BUT I HAD MY EYES ON AN EVEN MORE INFLUENTIAL PATRON...

'ARCH LECTOR
VON WASMEIER.

'KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE REGION AS ONE
OF SIGMAR'S MOST PIOUS SERVANTS.

'HIS ZEALOUS PUNISHMENT OF THE
FAITHLESS WAS LEGENDARY.



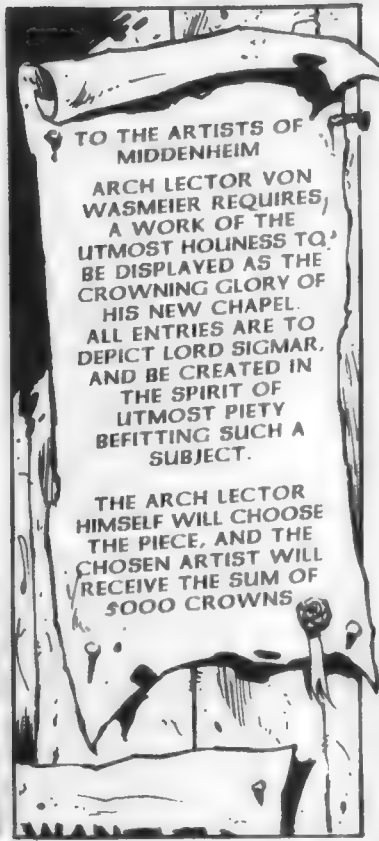
'IN FACT, HIS LOVE OF
A VENGEFUL GOD WAS
MATCHED ONLY BY HIS
LOVE OF ARTWORKS
DEPICTING THAT GOD.

'AND AS WORK NEARED
COMPLETION ON HIS NEW
CHAPEL ON THE OUTSKIRTS
OF MIDDENHEIM, I SAW MY
CHANCE TO IMPRESS HIM
WITH MY SKILLS.'

TO THE ARTISTS OF
MIDDENHEIM

ARCH LECTOR VON
WASMEIER REQUIRES
A WORK OF THE
UTMOST HOUNESS TO
BE DISPLAYED AS THE
CROWNING GLORY OF
HIS NEW CHAPEL.
ALL ENTRIES ARE TO
DEPICT LORD SIGMAR,
AND BE CREATED IN
THE SPIRIT OF
UTMOST PIETY
BEFITTING SUCH A
SUBJECT.

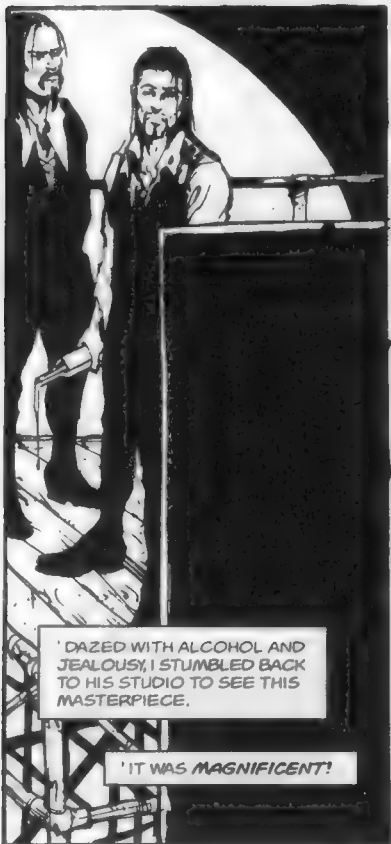
THE ARCH LECTOR
HIMSELF WILL CHOOSE
THE PIECE, AND THE
CHOSEN ARTIST WILL
RECEIVE THE SUM OF
5000 CROWNS



'IT WAS WEALTH BEYOND MY
MOST FEVERED IMAGININGS.

'I SET TO WORK
IMMEDIATELY.'





' THEN, AS MY OLD FRIEND LAY BLEEDING HIS LAST, ANOTHER KIND OF *MADNESS* CAME OVER ME. I LOOKED ONCE MORE AT HIS BEAUTIFUL PAINTING OF SIGMAR...



' AND HAD A WONDERFUL IDEA.'

IT IS *DIVINE* IN ITS PERFECTION! I CAN ONLY THINK THAT THE SPIRIT OF SIGMAR HIMSELF MUST HAVE GUIDED YOU WHEN YOU CREATED SUCH A *MASTERPIECE!*



' THERE WAS NOTHING TO MATCH JOHANN'S PAINTING, AND THE PRIZE WAS MINE!'

SO WHAT IS YOUR PROBLEM, STRANGER? YOU WON THE GOLD, AND THE PATRONAGE OF A POWERFUL PRIEST. I FAIL TO SEE YOUR POINT.



AVARICE IS A *TRAP* WAITING TO BE SPRUNG, FRIEND. I WON THE PRIZE, BUT LOST THE ONE THING I TRULY NEEDED.



YOUR SKILLS ARE OF SUCH MAGNIFICENCE, THAT IT TROUBLES ME TO THINK OF THEM BEING USED ON ANY *LESS* WORTHY SUBJECTS. THE RESULTS COULD BE NOTHING LESS THAN HERETICAL.

I FEEL DUTY-BOUND TO ENSURE YOU WORK FOR NO ONE ELSE.



MY SIGHT.



THE END



The Sleep of the Dead

— DARIUS HINKS —

COUNT ROTHENBURG finished his gruesome tale with a wry smile and leant back into the comfortable leather of his chair. As he viewed us over the rim of his wineglass, the light of the fire glinted in his vivid blue eyes, and he gave a mischievous laugh.

'Well? Have I stunned you all into silence?'

There was a round of manly coughs and laughter, as we attempted to dispel the sombre mood he had created. 'Bored us into silence maybe,' chortled one gentleman. 'I've heard that story several times before, and at least once from your own lips!'

'Aye,' said another, with an exaggerated yawn. 'I think maybe you've been enjoying a little too much of your own hospitality.'

With some difficulty I managed to rise from my chair and wander unsteadily over to the window. The count's cellar was stocked beyond the wildest dreams of most of Nuln's citizens, and we had spent the better part of the evening attempting to make a small dent in it. As I gazed drunkenly out into the moonlit splendour of Rothenburg's ornamental garden, I struggled to remove the more unpleasant details of his story from my memory.

Tales of unspeakable horrors and strange happenings seemed to have become the mainstay of our conversation whenever we met. I doubt any of us could pinpoint the exact genesis of this morbid

tradition, but it seemed now that every gathering was simply an excuse to plumb to new depths of absurd fantasy.

I shivered.

Bravado insisted that we make light of even the most shocking yarns, but I could not help wondering where it might all lead. This passionate desire to outdo each other made me somehow nervous.

Stories sometimes have a way of returning to haunt you.

'I have a tale,' murmured a voice from behind me, 'though... though I am not sure it is right that... that I should share it.'

A ripple of derisory laughter filled the room.

'Ho!' exclaimed the count, leaning forward in his chair, 'what a coy temptress you are, Gormont! "Not sure it is right" you say! What a tease! Do you take us for a bunch of prudes?'

I turned from the window and saw that the Gormont in question was a small, anonymous-looking youth I had not previously noticed. He was sat away from the light of the fire, in the shadows by the door, and was obviously very drunk. As the party turned their attention towards him, he retreated back into the folds of his huge chair like a cornered rat, and seemed to regret having spoken.

'Well?' demanded our host, obviously intrigued, 'what have you to share with us, nephew?'

'I'm not totally sure – not sure I should...' he whispered, shuffling nervously in his seat.

There was an expectant silence, as we all waited for him to continue.

'I have brought something with me, you see...'

There was another chorus of laughter, and one of the guests began slapping his thighs dramatically. 'He has something with him! He has something with him! Speak, boy! We demand entertainment!'

I peered through the smoky gloom to get a clearer view. There was a manic quality to the boy's expression that seemed to go beyond mere drunkenness; he was obviously torn between an eagerness to impress his audience, and fear.

For several more moments he prevaricated and evaded, and soon the haranguing of the group reached such a deafening volume that even the servants began to look nervous.

'Very well,' he shouted finally over the din, looking somehow triumphant and terrified at the same time, 'I will speak!'

A grin spread across the count's handsome face and the room grew quiet. I looked around at the circle of rapt faces. The combined effect of the wine and the glow of the fire gave us the appearance of hungry daemons, leering over a defenceless prey. I knew all too well the urbane derision that would greet the conclusion of the boy's tale, yet we were all, to a man, desperate to hear it relayed.

'I must beg of you that this go no further!' hissed Gormont dramatically.

The count rolled his eyes as this cheap showmanship, but shooed his servants from the room nevertheless.

Gormont cleared his throat nervously and began. 'My family has employed the same physician for decades,' he said, turning away from us to rummage in a bag. 'Gustav Insel. You may have heard of him?' He turned to face us questioningly, holding up a few scraps of paper. 'This is his journal. Well, some of his journal, that is. Do you swear to secrecy gentlemen?'

'Get on with it boy!' cried the count in an imperious tone, which caused Gormont to flinch.

'Very... very well,' he stammered. 'I'm sure we all understand these matters require discretion.'

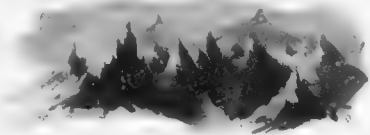
We nodded impatiently, without the slightest idea what he was talking about.

'Yes, Gustav Insel. When I was a child he treated me for every imaginable ailment, and has bled my family regularly for almost every year of my life. Every year, that is, until last year. We heard rumours that he had gone abroad, or been killed even, and my father was forced – at some inconvenience – to find another doctor. However, just a few months back, he returned and the change in him was awful to behold.' An expression of almost comical dismay came over the boy's face. 'That a man can be so altered, in the space of a year is hard to comprehend.

'I would not have given any credence to this,' he continued, holding up the papers, 'were it not for the fact that some of the incidents mentioned seem to have a basis in actual facts. Ships' records and the like seem to concur; and the baron he describes is no fictional character – I have made some enquiries, and not only did he exist, but also he did indeed disappear in a most mysterious fashion. And the foreigner – Mansoul – I have discovered that he also exists.'

'I cannot bear this!' exclaimed the count, striding across the room and snatching the papers from Gormont. 'We'll all be in our grave by the time you start the first paragraph! Let me read the thing myself!'

Gormont seemed too shocked – or too inebriated – to resist, and Rothenburg marched back to his seat with the journal. He turned the papers over in his hands a few times, and then began to read: 'It is only as a warning to others that I tell this morbid tale...'



IT IS ONLY as a warning to others that I tell this morbid tale.

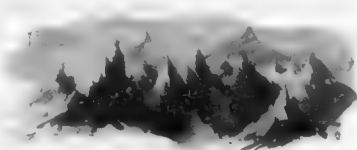
For myself, I would wish nothing more than to wipe the whole tragic affair from my memory. However, my duty is clear, and I could not, in all conscience, allow these terrible facts to go unrecorded. Even now, only months after my return to the south, those events which have so haunted my every waking moment are already becoming indistinct and hazy. It is almost as though such terrible visions are too much for a mortal mind to comprehend; like worms they writhe and twist in my thoughts – elusive and serpentine, eager to avoid a closer inspection. But I will pin them to these pages with my quill. My tale must be told.

We set sail from Erengard on the good ship *Heldenhammer* in the year 2325. As ship's surgeon, and close friend of our intrepid employer, Baron Fallon von Kelspar, I was blessed with a cabin that was merely unpleasant rather than uninhabitable. The damp seeped through the bed linen and the rats nested in my clothes, but to have a bed of any sort was enough to earn the enmity of our swarthy Kislevite crew. They eyed me resentfully from within their fur-lined hoods.

Still, if it is possible for me to remember any stage of that doomed expedition with fondness, it would be those first few days. The baron wore the air of a man possessed, and his enthusiasm was infectious. Even the Kislevites seemed affected by it. The whole ship's company was charged with his fervour.

There were, however, rumours of a scandal following closely on his heels, and I heard it said that his journey to the north was one of convenience as much as discovery. Certainly it was true that he seemed to show scant regard for the family estates he had abandoned so suddenly, and he politely evaded any enquiries about the baroness; but nevertheless, I could not doubt him. Seeing him stood at the prow of the ship, leaning forward impatiently into the bitterly cold wind, I found it impossible to harbour any suspicions as to his character. In fact, with the ice freezing in his beard

and the snow settling on his broad shoulders, he looked more worthy of trust than any man I have ever served. My faith in him was absolute.



WE HAD MADE good headway around the coast of Norsca, but were in the midst of a five-day gale when the first of many disasters struck. I was up in the slings of the foreyard, struggling to hang on as the ship rolled and lurched, when out across the churning black sea I spied a jagged shape rearing up from the horizon.

'Land,' I called down to the deck where our captain, Hausenblas, was busily bailing water with the rest of the crew, 'to starboard!'

He rushed to the prow of the ship, and shielded his eyes from the snow. Even from my perch up in the swaying spars, I saw the colour drain from his face and, as he hurried back to his cabin, I clambered down the rigging with fear already tightening in my stomach.

Moments later, the baron and I watched helplessly as he pored over his maps and charts with increasing desperation. 'Clar Karond?' he muttered.

'Can we be that far west? It cannot be!' Although the name meant nothing to me, my fear continued to grow, and as I watched him wading through map after map, filling the cabin with a storm of papers, I wondered what it was that I had seen out there across the waves. What could have driven Hausenblas into such a frenzy?

Finally, as his muttered curses seemed on the verge of hysteria, Kelspar stepped forward and calmly placed a hand on his shoulder. 'Captain,' he said, 'is there something you would like to share with us?'

Hausenblas whirled around to face the baron. Kelspar's composed tone seemed to calm him a little, but there was a wild

look in his eyes and, as he replied, he could not disguise the tremor in his voice. 'North of the Empire all is damnation and ruin, baron, but a sailor of my years can – with the good will of Manaann – avoid the worst of the dangers...' His voice trailed off into silence, and he looked distractedly out of the porthole.

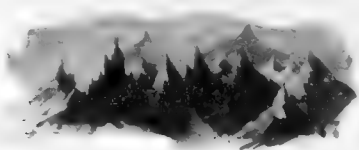
'Yes?' prompted Kelspar after a few moments.

Hausenblas grabbed a crumpled piece of parchment and thrust it at the baron. 'It's the Clar Karond peninsular!' he barked. 'The storm has taken us too far west! We've entered the land of chill, where the foul corrupted elves dwell!'

I gasped involuntarily. The ship's carpenter had told me many tales and legends concerning that cruel, mysterious race, and the look of fear in the captain's eyes banished any doubt I may have held about their existence.

'They'll be on us like dogs within hours,' wailed Hausenblas, dropping heavily into a chair. 'We don't stand a chance.'

Kelspar stood in silence for a few moments, seemingly lost in thought, then he nodded and strode out into the raging storm.



WITH EVERY OUNCE of his skill and experience, our captain tried to steer the *Heldenhammer* away from the coast I had spied, but Manaann's thoughts must have been elsewhere that day and within hours, sinister silhouettes began looming out of the tempest like ghosts. At first, as I peered out through the falling snow, I thought we were being surrounded by great living creatures – terrible leviathans of the deep, with brutal slender claws and arched ragged wings; but as they grew nearer, I realised to my amazement that they were ships.

They were like no ships I had ever seen before.

Their design seemed the work of some strange, incomprehensible mind; but despite their hideousness, I could not deny that was also a perverse beauty to them. The twisted curves and cruel lines were strangely sensuous, and graceful.

The charismatic baron had a way of making the impossible seem achievable, and whatever the scheme, his men would leap to realise his every whim and fancy. They were not fools, however. An expedition into the unforgiving north, from whence few men had returned was something that required the necessary tools, and from the bowels of the ship emerged an armoury fit to defend a small city: swords, slings, muskets and the like were soon arrayed along the taffrail in their dozens as the men prepared to engage the enemy. Beside them stood all of the crew that could be spared – these were men used to hardship and war, living so far north, and they would not give up their livelihood, or their lives, easily.

The *Heldenhammer* was no warship, however, and there was little that could be done to prevent the dark elves boarding us. After a brief game of cat and mouse, their grappling hooks and ropes began sailing over the deck, and I finally saw with my own eyes the terrifying nature of our foe. In terms of physical proportions they were not so different from men; but there the similarity ended. Their screaming elongated faces froze my blood in a way that the even the icy temperatures had failed to do, and the twisted, ornate curves of their armour left me gasping with fear – what possible hope could we have against such a foul corruption of nature? I saw in an instant that there was no hope for us against such inhuman opponents.

From out of the dazzling whirling snow they came, falling on us like daemons. Cruel blades glinted in the cold light as the elves hacked and lunged. Frozen fingers fought to grip the hafts of weapons, and warm blood washed over the icy deck. I fought blind, with the snow in my eyes, and in my fear I struck wildly at every shape that came near me. Sigmar

preserve me, but in those moments of panic I knew not what, nor whom I struck with my clumsy blows. The battle was not the epic struggle for glory I had so often read about; but rather it was a brutal, ignoble farce with men slipping about on the ice and blood, while others fell clumsily on their own blades.

It was with something akin to relief that I felt a blow against the back of my head; and as I collapsed into the welcoming oblivion of death, I felt as though I had cheated fate in escaping the fight so early on.



IN THE FROZEN wastelands of the north, strange sinews of light flicker in the heavens, fitfully illuminating the blasted landscape; but all else, as far as the eye can see, is darkness.

I did not perish on the rolling deck of the *Heldenhammer*, but as I stumbled on through the endless night of Har Ganeth – the bleak, frozen tundra that lies far to the north of our glorious Empire – I wondered if that was such a blessing. Certainly with the benefit of hindsight, knowing all that I now know, it would have been a kindness to have died then, innocent of the horrors that were to follow.

It had been the baron himself who plucked me from beneath the mound of corpses, and as I watched him striding through the knee-deep snow, just a few yards ahead of me, I wondered at his fortitude. The battle against the elves had been a grim, brutal affair, and whilst the victory had been ours, it had been hard won. Few of the baron's men had made it off the *Heldenhammer* alive – it was a pitiful group who remained to set foot on the packed ice of that forbidding wasteland – yet Kelspar seemed utterly undaunted.

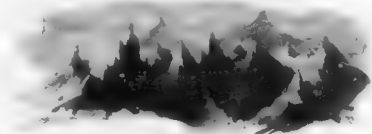
As for the rest of us, it was the white heat of our own avarice that drove us onwards through the plummeting temperatures. I remembered all too well

the cheery warmth of the baron's drawing room, and the passion with which he had told me his story. It was a tale of the Hung: fierce, nomadic wild-men who roamed the barren north, worshipping foul ancient gods, and feasting on the flesh of their own fallen. It was a tale of frozen lands and unexplored realms; but most of all, it was a tale of gold.

I had seen with my own eyes some of the strange guests entertained by Kelspar over the years: many of them travellers from the east, with gifts of exotic spices and lurid poetry, who regaled the wide-eyed baron with tales of uncountable wealth in the vast steppes of the north. I had heard one man in particular – a small, twitching seer named Mansoul – tell the baron in hushed tones of a great city called Yin-Chi, deep in the realms of the Hung. He whispered of great towers of ivory and gold rising out of the ice-capped mountains, and streets littered with the accumulated wealth of generations of the barbarians. As I turned away to pour the baron and his guest another glass of Carcassonne brandy, I had seen in the cut crystal a sinister fractured image of the room behind me, in which Mansoul discretely leant towards the baron and slipped him a crumpled map. From that moment, my interest was piqued – and my fate sealed.

All the remaining members of our party now shared this vision of riches, and to a man we were consumed with greed.

There were seven of us in all, plus dogs, a sledge, food supplies and other items, including a mysterious chest the baron claimed would guarantee our entry into the fabled city. From his hints I deduced it contained gunpowder, or mage-fire of some sort, with which he presumably intended to create a distraction. In truth, I had not pressed him too hard as to the details of his plan – I knew he had one and, in my fevered lust for wealth, that was enough.



I THOUGHT I HAD known the meaning of cold before we set foot in that cursed realm... but I was wrong.

It is the nights that I remember the most. As the wind howled outside the tents, we cowered inside, sleepless on bedding too frozen to crawl into, and with terrible cramps in our stomachs from the fat-laden food we were forced to eat.

Then, with no dawn to guide us, we would rise at some arbitrary hour and attempt to don our packs; but by this time our robes were like plate-armour, and our hoods had become soldered to our faces. We would lumber off like a group of bloated revenants, limping and stumbling through the powdery whiteness. Our breath froze and cracked painfully in our beards, and beneath all the layers of coats and tunics, our own sweat became ice. Without the kernel of avarice glowing deep in my thoughts, I think I would have simply lay down in the soft embrace of the snow, and lost myself in the peaceful sleep of the dead.

But, even then I had not experienced a fraction of the horror that was in store for me.

Despite the horrors we had already endured, it was not until the twenty-first day of our slow, tortuous trek that we discovered the true face of terror. It was the dogs that first alerted us to the fact that we were no longer alone in the snow. At first they seemed merely nervous, barking more than usual and hesitating where they had previously been sure-footed. In the pale light of the moon, the all-encompassing whiteness felt smothering and claustrophobic, and the agitation of the animals quickly filled us all with a nameless dread. The younger members of the party began flinching at imagined shapes in the drifting banks of snow, and even the baron seemed to quicken his pace a little.

Soon the dogs became utterly impossible to control. They howled and yelped, seemingly in mortal terror for their lives, and however much the baron cursed and kicked them, they would go no further. The barking sounded alien and muffled in the blizzard, and my mouth grew dry with fear.

Then, suddenly, the noise dropped. The dogs crouched low to the ground with their hackles raised and began emitting a low, pitiful whining sound that seemed horribly ominous.

We all waited.

The sound of my heart thudded so loudly in my ears that I felt certain the others must surely hear it.

I looked over at Kelspar, and saw that his hands were resting nervously on his two long sabres. Something glittered in his eyes. Was it fear or merely impatience? I could discern nothing clearly through my ice-encrusted hood.

Silence reigned, and I sensed the muscles of every man near me tensing with expectation. I felt I might scream just to break the awful quiet.

Then, out of the snow, came the creature from my darkest childhood dreams. My mind split like a shattered glass as I beheld a sight that in one cruel stroke tore apart my every conception of all that was logical and natural in the world. It loomed out of the whiteness like a mighty tree crashing down on us. Its size was immense – ten feet tall at least; but it was not the scale of the thing that tore screams of abject horror from me, it was its form: a shifting writhing mass of muscle and teeth that had no right to exist in an ordered world. Bestial faces howled and moaned in its blood-red flesh, before twisting into other indescribably awful shapes, and cruel weapons appeared from nowhere in claws that had previously not existed.

I'm afraid any greater detail is impossible for me to relate; my mind seemed as incapable of grasping the being's true nature as my hands would be to grasp falling snow. To my shame, my legs gave way completely in the face of such a monstrous assault on my senses and I fell to the floor.

Fortunately, the others somehow retained the strength of their limbs and drew weapons to strike. A burly Middenheimer near to me swung an ice pick at the heaving, thrashing creature, but its muscles seemed to slip effortlessly out of the way of his weapon. As we all

looked on in horror the man was lifted up into the air by several pairs of arms, and, with a sound like the ripping of wet cloth, torn clean in half. Another man leapt at the beast with a terrified howl, swinging his hammer at what seemed to be a face, but the creature tore him open like ripe fruit and his remains fell steaming onto the snow.

I saw then that our expedition was over, and that our end had come. I prepared myself for the pain.

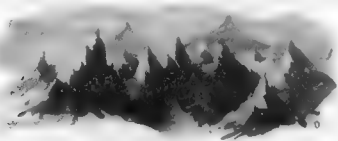
The baron had other ideas, however. With a look of determination that seemed absurd in the face of such an unholy apparition, he strode purposefully towards the creature with his musket drawn, and before the lumbering, howling brute had registered his presence, he unloaded his buckshot straight into what currently appeared to be its face.

The pitch of the thing's voice suddenly rose to a high-pitched keening, and for a split second, as a torrent of gore rushed from its head, the beast's form became fixed and solid. The baron seized his chance and, as we all looked on, paralysed with fear, he drew both his sabres, stepped calmly forward, and thrust them straight through the creature's gelatinous eyes.

There was an explosion of noise and blood as the thing reared up in pain, and at that moment, spurred on by their leader's fearlessness, the other men rushed forward and plunged their weapons into its still unchanging form.

This seemed more than it could bear, and with a deafening roar of impotent rage and a spray of blood and viscera, it lurched back into the shadows from whence it came.

'Bloodbeast,' said the baron calmly, wiping the gore from his swords and face.



FROM THAT TIME on, I fear I became something of a burden to the others. My mind seemed irreparably torn and I found even the smallest tasks arduous. The best I could do was to shuffle along behind the others like a simpleton, muttering to myself and flinching constantly at imagined apparitions.

Strangely, little was said of the attack over the following days. The bodies of the dead men were placed in rudimentary graves, and we marched on in silence. It seemed too awful a subject to broach; and what good could come of raising it? We were alone in the wilderness. What could we do? Other than his enigmatic statement after the beast had fled, the baron had said nought else on the subject.

Bloodbeast. What could such a word mean? It festered in my fractured thoughts like a canker. How was it that the baron could put a name to such a monstrosity? What foul tomes had he pored over to discover such a phrase? I itched to interrogate him on the matter; but I feared that what would start as rational speech would descend into the wailing gibberish of a madman. So I simply acted out the mechanics of life and waited for the violent death that I felt was waiting for me out there in the snow.

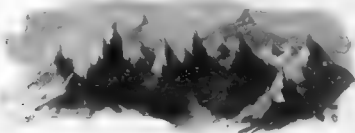
In the fourth week of our journey we perceived a change in the landscape. We appeared to be crossing a great plateau and occasionally, through gaps in the constant downpour, we spied what might be the distant crowns of a mountain range. The Baron's determination seemed not to have waned one jot and, if anything, at the sight of those peaks, I noticed a quickening of his pace. He began checking Mansoul's map more frequently, and I detected a new urgency in his voice when he spurred us on. Could we be getting near, I wondered, and, like a long forgotten tune my greed returned to me. I felt a new resolve harden in me and I put aside my idle thoughts of lying down to sleep on the crisp white bed of snow.

The turn around in my spirits was, however, short lived. On the morning of the thirty-first day of that journey into despair, I awoke to a nightmare. As the baron and I lurched awkwardly from our tent to raise the others, we saw their tent slashed and flapping in the wind, and their equally torn bodies strewn across the bloodstained snow.

All three were dead.

The scene was too much for me and I retched dryly as I beheld it. Their remains were barely recognisable: it was unmistakably the work of the creature Kelspar had named Bloodbeast.

I searched for hours, but could not find their heads.



MY DESCENT into lunacy now seemed complete. I was nothing but a gibbering wretch. I lay on the ground and called out for the beast to come and take me. I begged for death.

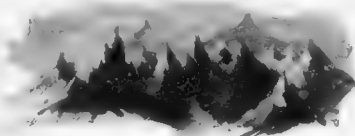
I was, however, all that the baron had left by way of a companion and, slapping me firmly across the face, he insisted that I take hold of myself and remember that I was not some raving savage, but a gentleman of the Empire. Through fear of his rage, rather than any real self-control, I managed to make a show of calming myself.

Fortunately, the dogs were miraculously unharmed and I begged the baron to consider returning to the coast. We had a rendezvous arranged with Hausenblas and the *Heldenhammer*, and if we made good speed we might still evade horrors that waited for us in the snow.

'What?' cried Kelspar, his eyes flashing in the dark. 'You would return now? When we have come so far?' Suddenly I feared him almost as much as anything else in that frozen netherworld. There was a barely checked hatred in his voice as he grasped my jacket and pulled my face to his. 'Are you mad? Only days away from

treasures you could not even comprehend and you would turn back?' He hurled me to the ground, and rested a hand on the butt of his pistol. 'We go on, Gustav,' he growled. 'We go on.'

From then on I became little more than a beast of burden to the baron. His dislike for me was painfully apparent, and it seemed I was there simply to lug around the box of explosives and the other luggage, while the baron plotted our course.



WAS IT THE madness and carnage I had endured, or the lack of food? Or was it – as certainly it seemed – the very air that began to warp my senses? My mind seemed gradually to be growing strange to me. Alien thoughts, of no apparent sense, gripped me as we rushed over the snow on the sledge. Scenes of violence and power only to be replaced just as quickly by a grovelling awe of what lay ahead. Now when I saw those mountains through a gap in the blizzard, they seemed near and strangely ominous. Something in their make-up seemed not the stuff of reality, but rather the ethereal matter of dreams and visions.

The shifting, capricious nature of my mind began to distort even my memory. The details of my life leading up to that point would sometimes slip away and be replaced by darker memories filled with blood, and a lust for war. I fear my reason was truly gone by this time and I can only accept that my description of what followed cannot be considered the product of a completely rational mind.

Desire seemed to grow in the baron as we neared the peaks. He seemed now almost unrecognisable as the cultured, urbane gentleman I had met all those years ago in Nuln. His face was now a frozen mask of greed and lust. I could not meet his eye and, as the days went by, I grew to fear him greatly.

I KNOW NOT WHAT day nor week it was, but finally the awful contortions of my mind reached a crisis point. Whenever I saw the mountains now they seemed of no fixed shape, but instead they had become a shifting mass – much in the manner of the foul creature that had attacked us. The stone seemed in some places to be formed into monstrous screaming skulls, whilst in others it became impossibly tall towers, whose sinister shapes reared up into the darkness like claws. I even fancied that I saw the faces of beings too hideous and incomprehensible for me to describe, looming above the peaks and beckoning us on.

Finally I could take no more. I knew that the baron was leading me not to wealth and glory, but death and madness. Sigmar forgive me, I began plotting his murder.

The state of my ruptured mind, however, meant that while I had intended to contrive some subtle plan with which I would safely kill my erstwhile protector, I instead leapt on him clumsily with my knife at the first sight of him looking distracted. He was in the process of lifting the heavy chest of explosives from the sled when I attacked, and sent him, the box and myself all tumbling down a steep drift of snow.

We spun and tumbled silently in the soft powdery whiteness, and when we came to a stop I noticed two things: firstly, the baron's leg was lying at a hideously unnatural angle to the rest of his body, obviously broken, and secondly: the baron's wooden chest had split open during the fall, spreading its contents over the snow.

I froze in shock.

Rather than the gunpowder I had been expecting to see, I saw instead the severed, and by now quite frozen, heads of our three murdered companions.

'It was you?' I gasped through a parched throat. 'You killed them?'

'Of course,' snapped the baron impatiently, trying to rise on his one good leg. 'How else does one buy entry

into the kingdom of the Blood God, but with skulls?'

My mind reeled. In a heartbeat I saw that Kelspar had never intended to simply plunder some mythical city like a common thief, but rather he wished nothing less than to offer his fealty to the Dark Gods themselves. His years of research into the peoples of the north must have corrupted his mind. The man was a heretic!

I lurched towards him through the snow, raising my knife to strike, but he was quicker, and even balanced on one leg he managed to aim his pistol at my head.

'Fool,' he said, with a bitter laugh, 'you could have joined me in paradise.' And with that he pulled the trigger.

I flinched, but felt no pain.

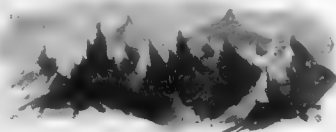
Looking down I saw no blood, and so I raised my eyes to the baron in confusion.

By the look of rage and frustration on his face, I guessed what had happened – the hammer of his weapon had frozen fast.

I took my chance, kicked away his one good leg, and thrust my blade deep into his chest.

I stepped back in horror as he thrashed furiously around with the weapon still protruding from his coat. His cries and curses were too terrible to bear and I covered my ears as I staggered away.

As I turned the sledge around and headed back south, I could still hear his cries echoing weirdly through the darkness – even after several hours had passed, the hideous noise was still there, shaming me with every cry of rage and pain.

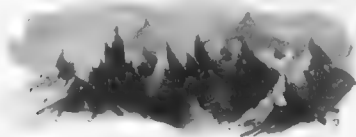


AS I SIT HERE now, by the warmth of my fire, I question all that I once felt so sure about. I question even my opinion of the baron. Maybe he

had intended to simply find his treasure and return to the south; maybe it was only after we entered that forsaken realm that his thoughts turned to madness and the unspeakable gods of the north. The one thing I *am* sure of is that it was no city of the Hung he was leading me towards; if I had followed him over those forbidding mountains, I believe I would have entered another realm completely. Sigmar forgive me, but since my desperate flight to the coast, and my rendezvous with the *Heldenhammer*, I cannot stop my thoughts straying back to those mountains, and wondering what I may have discovered on the other side.

I find myself sleeping more than is natural, and in my dreams the baron still calls to me; but his cries are no longer full of rage and pain, they are the words of a man who has found a great prize and simply wishes to share it. When I awake, my sheets damp with sweat, his voice still echoes through my thoughts: 'You could have joined me in paradise' he calls.

As the days crawl by, all that was once so dear to me seems chaff, and I find it harder and harder to resist his call.



THERE WAS A long silence which even Count Rothenburg seemed reluctant to break.

Finally, after several awkward minutes had passed, he spoke, but his voice did not carry the ring of confidence I was used to. 'How did you come by this journal?'

Gormont smiled conspiratorially, obviously revelling in the tense atmosphere his tale had engendered. 'My father's study,' he replied smugly. 'He thinks it secure in his safe, but he has few secrets I am not aware of.'

The count stared at him.

'And where is this "Gustav" now?'

'Well,' said Gormont, rising from his chair, and beginning to stroll cockily around the room, 'when he came to us, he was obviously in a very bad way, and so my father took him in out of pity; but he soon regretted it. The man had obviously lost his reason – we would hear him wailing like a lame dog in the middle of the night, and his presence in the house was beginning to play havoc with my poor mother's nerves. Then, thankfully, two nights ago he disappeared as suddenly as he arrived, leaving behind all his possessions – including the journal.'

I had never seen it before, and I never saw it again, but the count was lost for words. He gaped at Gormont as though the lad were suddenly a stranger to him. There was a terrible ring of truth to the tale that had finally silenced us all, and even the count seemed incapable of making light of his nephew's story. He began to reread the journal in silence – seeming to forget that he still had company – and as he pored over the words, a frown of deep concentration settled over his face.

Soon, the guests began to depart, pulling on their great coats in an uncomfortable silence, and disappearing one by one into the cold winter's night.

A little while later, as I stood in the hall buttoning my own coat, I noticed the count leading Gormont away towards his private chambers. As they turned a corner and disappeared from view, I heard a brief snatch of their conversation.

At the time the words seemed of no importance, but since Rothenburg's mysterious disappearance, they have begun to haunt my thoughts. In fact, they have circled my mind now so many times, that I doubt I will ever forget them.

'Tell me again,' I heard the count say to his nephew, 'what you know of the map and the man called Mansoul.' ❧

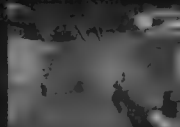
IT IS THE 41st MILLENNIUM.

THERE IS ONLY WAR.

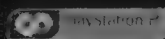


YOU ARE KIDS & FIRE WARRIOR.

THE NEXT 24 HOURS WILL BE HELL.



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A CRUSADE FOR ARMAGEDDON STORY

SANCTUARY

JONATHAN GREEN

MARSHAL BRANT of the Solemnus Crusade watched as the ochre sphere rotated lazily above the hololithic display plate, projected within the centre of the nave-like bridge of the battle barge. Almost devoid of cloud cover, the hololithic image of the planet flickered and jerked occasionally as grainy static washed through it.

Seven years had passed since they had begun their quest. A quest for vengeance, to recover their honour, stolen from them on that dark day years ago and a thousand light years away. Seven years since the foul ork horde had fallen on the feudal world of Solemnus to wreak untold devastation. Seven years since the aliens' asteroid-fortress abomination had descended on that sacred world and levelled one of the mightiest Chapter keeps ever constructed in the long history of the greatest crusade ever undertaken by the warriors of the holy Adeptus Astartes.

It had been one of the darkest of days recorded in the annals of the Emperor's most devout of Astartes Chapters, a black mark that could only be washed clean with the blood of the alien perpetrators of this heinous crime. And so for seven years the Black Templars of the Solemnus Crusade had hunted the greenskins who followed the banner of the scarred ork across the galaxy, knowing neither where they had come from nor where they were going to, not even knowing the name of the warmongering tribe responsible for the outrage committed against them, nor the savage alien warlord who led the

horde in its rampage across the dominion of the Emperor of Mankind.

And after seven years the hunt had brought the Templars here, to a world so devoid of life that it had not been named beyond its initial planetary classification of L-739. According to Imperial records, the world had only been colonised fifty years ago, for the sole purpose of extracting the one thing that L-739 had to offer the hard-pressed Imperium. Survey teams had discovered fulgerium on the planet, an isotope that was used in some of the power sources still manufactured by certain Adeptus Mechanicus forge worlds. It was used to power everything from ancient Titan war engines to interplanetary craft.

But now the colony mining world was abandoned, the only life-sign readings the *Divine Fury's* surveyor and augury arrays registered on the planet below being those of the away team who had arrived aboard the other vessel in orbit around the dust ball planet.

Slowly Brant circled the hololithic display, his ceramite boots ringing on the stone flags in the vaulted space. Peering closely he could see the spinning, three-dimensional icon of the skull-cross insignia of the Black Templars Chapter denoting the fleet's position in geo-stationary orbit over the arid wilderness world. Next to it was an altogether different logo – a cog-toothed symbol. Below both the badges a red target icon flashed steadily, gothic runes projected next to it designating it as Fulgerium Mining Outpost Beta-Three.

Through one eye L-739 appeared to Brant as an ochre sphere rotating lazily within the void of space. Through the other – a red-lensed bionic optical implant – the planet appeared as a malevolent crimson orb, as if soaked in the blood of innocents. He had seen a dozen worlds through this blood-tinted augmetic and on those same worlds death had followed in the wake of the Solemnus Crusade. Was what he was seeing now a premonition of what was to come?

A dark chill passed momentarily through the marshal's body. It was not fear: Space Marines knew no fear, for they were fear incarnate. No, this was merely an extra-sensory feeling of impending doom, perhaps a warning sent by the Emperor to this marshal of His Imperial Majesty's most devout and fanatical order of the Black Templars Adeptus Astartes Chapter.

It was not fulgerium that had brought Brant's fleet to L-739. Having no leads as to the whereabouts of his brotherhood's mortal enemy, for the last two years of his noble crusade Marshal Brant had sought out the clandestine keepers of the most secret and forbidden knowledge the Imperium possessed regarding the foul greenskinned aliens. But the Ordo Xenos of His Majesty's Holy Inquisition did not give up such information lightly. During those two years, as well as battling the followers of the warp-spawned dark gods for a time, Brant had had to recover an ancient artefact of alien origin for the shadowy masters of the Ordo Xenos before they would even reveal to him the whereabouts of the sector's foremost, and possibly least well-known, authority on ork-kind – the infamous Inquisitor Ardur Ourumov.

Brant focussed again on the cog-toothed insignia visible next to the *Divine Fury* on the hololith display.

'Open a vox-channel to the vessel in orbit,' he instructed his bridge crew.

'Channel open, my lord,' an initiate informed him a moment later.

'This is Marshal Brant of the Black Templar battle barge *Divine Fury*,' the crusader fleet's master intoned, his

booming voice echoing from the buttresses and pillars of the nave-bridge. 'Identify yourself.'

A voice, less confident or strident than the marshal's echoed ethereally in response from crackling vox-casters within the bridge: 'This is Magos-Captain Olandus of the Adeptus Mechanicus Explorator vessel *Antiquitas*.'

'Am I correct in thinking that the esteemed Inquisitor Ourumov has accompanied you here?'



MARSHAL BRANT gazed through the armourplasm windshield at the ochre planet that now filled the field of vision through the front of the Thunderhawk gunship. Just visible amidst the crazed fissures of a plateau-plain, still a hundred kilometres beneath them, was the black shape of the mining facility, looking like some alien spider clinging limpet-like to the surface of L-739.

Sanctuary. That was what the colonist-miners had named Fulgerium Mining Outpost Beta-Three. A sanctuary from the months of warp travel. A sanctuary from the humid, stinking squalor of life aboard the transport freighters. But what happened to this one small safe haven for it to have been abandoned? And would it prove to be the sanctuary Brant and the Black Templars hoped it would be from the endless quest for vengeance and retribution? The answer lay below with the elusive Inquisitor Ourumov.

The marshal looked back at the men strapped into their seats within the hold of the Thunderhawk. The *Paladin* had seen worthy service in the seven years since the Solemnus Crusade commenced and in the years before, particularly during the Diabolus Campaign and the insurrection and the Thunderhawk was the object of Brother-Pilot Brehus's honour and pride.

The three squads of devout warriors arrayed behind him were among the finest in the Chapter. Between them their years of experience, gained on over a hundred battlefields, amounted to more than thirty centuries of combat practice.

Each of the three fighting companies of the Solemnus Crusade were represented here, in recognition of the fact that the mission they were pursuing was one of the utmost importance and shared by all the Templars who had called Solemnus home. It also recognised the fact that the marshal had complete and utter faith in all of the men under his command.

Marshal Brant fixed his men with the blood-red stare of his augmetic eye – gained during a boarding action carried out by devotee-crew of the unspeakable Blood God cruiser *Red Slaughter*. Chaplain Wolfram gazed back at him from behind the ruby-quartz lenses of his skull-faced helm, a grim reminder to every battle-brother who fought with him of their own mortality – and that they could offer the divine Emperor no greater service than to die in his name.

Laid out across the chaplain's knees, gripped firmly in both gauntleted hands, was his combined rod of office and instrument of the Emperor's wrath, his crozius arcanum. No two crozius were ever the same. Chaplain Wolfram's looked like the cross insignia of the Black Templars Chapter, joined to a metal haft incorporating an energy source and disruptor field generator. The blade-edges of the cross had been honed to cruel sharpness. And if that was not enough to penetrate the armour or hide of Wolfram's enemies, the humming blue energy field would mean that any blow struck by the crozius would leave the chaplain's vengeful mark upon them.

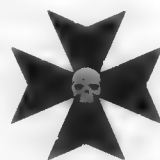
Seated next to the chaplain was his personal protector, Bodyguard Koldo. Brant could also see Techmarine Isendur, his crimson armour and additional servo-limb making him stand out from the other Black Templars aboard the *Paladin*.

He caught the eye of Veteran Sergeant Olaf of Fighting Company Gerhard, the gleaming bolt pistol he held proudly to his

chest inscribed with intricately incised verses of holy litany. Others from Gerhard's company included Brother-Initiate Meleagant, Rivalin, Initiate Josef and his charge of the last eight years, Neophyte Petrus.

On the other side of the Thunderhawk's interior sat the men Marshal Brant had hand-picked from the guard of his own household, among them Veteran Sergeant Lohengrin, Terminator-Brother Nudd and Protector Folke. In the seven years since their holy crusade began, individual brothers had earned titles that would be unknown amongst other Astartes chapters, in conflicts fought across thousands of light years.

Marshal Brant knew that the sole purpose of this mission was to finally meet with the enigmatic Inquisitor Ourumov and recover the information he possessed that could help the Black Templars pursue their righteous quest. But during that same quest he had come upon many unexpected things on otherwise benign-seeming worlds – the cultists of Zuhl, the invasion of Yenkatta – and it was only an unwise commander who did not prepare for the unexpected. After all, something had drawn Arduus Ourumov to this Emperor-forsaken planet – and where the Ordo Xenos were involved you could be sure that iniquity, insurgency and alien infestation weren't far away.



THE PALADIN touched down at the edge of the contorted ruins of the Fulgerium Mining Outpost Beta-Three's spaceport, the backwash from its jets throwing up obscuring clouds of dust and sand, as Brother-Pilot Brehus, quite possibly the best pilot in the fleet, guided the *Paladin* in as smoothly as if he were landing a replica in the simulatio chamber aboard the forgeship *Goliath*.

With a grinding hiss of hydraulics, the disembarkation ramp lowered and the Black Templars exited the craft, the glaring

sunlight harsh and unrelenting after the gloom of the Thunderhawk's interior. Led by their marshal, his habit-cloak flapping in the wind of the Thunderhawk's engine wash, the Space Marines fell into line as they advanced across the broken plaza before the mining facility, to where two wind-blown figures stood awaiting them.

The rockcrete of the plaza had been thrown up in great fractured craters and was scored with deep, heat-melted gouges. Some of these gouges opened into fissures as if something had sundered the very bedrock of the planet itself.

Outpost Beta-Three – Sanctuary – had fared no better. The mine workings were located at the end of a high-walled and otherwise desolate desert rift valley. The surface structures of the mine workings were centred on a vast cathedral-like building. Gothic-arched and baroque-buttressed cloisters led to smelting works, processing plants, worker habs and storage barns, forming a wheel with the cathedral at its hub.

But those same gothic arches and the baroque, gargyle-infested façade of the structure were now no more than twisted, blackened ruins. Much of the roof of the Mechanicus edifice was gone and entire outbuildings had been flattened in what must have been a bombardment of phenomenal power. There were girders cut in half by laser beams more furious than those of a Stormblade tank's lascannons and charred impact craters where whole structures had been obliterated. The droid-skull icon of the Machina Opus, which must once have adorned the lintel over the cathedral-mine's great double doors, was lying on the ground, riddled with bullet-holes and shell impacts, having been blasted from its mountings.

For this was not the result of any natural disaster. All the signs were there of an orbital attack. Brother Ansgar knew, for he had seen such a thing before. With a sharp intake of breath, the Space Marine gasped. He had seen many horrors fighting in the Emperor's name and had visited the ruins left after insurrections and invasions on a dozen Imperial worlds. But what he saw now took him back to Solemnus and the

ruins of the mighty Chapter Keep. A fortress that had stood for a thousand years and never been conquered had been levelled in one attack by a host of the foul greenskins of the abominable ork race from an, as yet, unknown tribe. And it was for that one reason that the Black Templars had come now to L-739 in search of Ardur Ourumov.

Brother Ansgar turned and looked back past the landing pad to where the valley opened outwards to a plain beyond. For an area of several hectares the rugged rocky ground had been melted and reformed into a shallow bowl as smooth as glass. It was just as it had been on Solemnus when the Black Templars descended from the orbiting fleet like avenging angels, bringing the Emperor's wrath down upon the sacrilegious orks.

The Space Marine turned back, hearing the marshal's voice raised in annoyance, to observe the interchange taking place between Marshal Brant's honour guard and those unfortunate souls who had been delegated the task of meeting the Templars.

The Space Marines – imposing two and a half metre tall colossi clad in armour as thick as that of a Leman Russ tank – dwarfed the two men standing at the edge of the spaceport plaza. One was tall and thin, wearing a long leather storm coat and a pair of scratch-lensed goggles pushed up on his forehead, keeping his unkempt shock of dirty dark brown hair out of his face. The second was shorter and appeared to be younger. He was wearing a plain grey tunic, jodhpurs and knee-length leather boots. His hair formed a widow's peak and his beard had been cut into little more than a narrow, right-angled outline, moustache and goatee. Ansgar could not help noticing the Inquisitorial rosette pinned to the man's breast.

But something was wrong: this apparently wasn't the man they were seeking. Marshal Brant did not appear happy about this either. His authoritarian tones carried across the plaza towards the serried ranks of the other Templars.

'Where is Inquisitor Ourumov?' the marshal was demanding. 'I was expecting to be met by him personally, not by some

ordo lackey. My fleet has travelled countless light years to find him and having arrived at last, after years of searching, I expect to be met by the princeps and not some junior tech-adept, to use an analogy of our Mechanicus brethren. Do you understand?’

This was an appalling breach of protocol. As if the battle-brothers of the Solemnus Crusade had not suffered a terrible enough affront to their honour already, this situation was intolerable.

‘I am Interrogator Helquist, of Inquisitor Ourumov’s staff, and this is Chief Explorator Magos Baldemar,’ the younger man explained. His companion bowed to the marshal.

‘Has the inquisitor been informed of our arrival?’ Brant demanded.

To give him his due, Helquist was not cowed by the ceramite-armoured giant’s dressing down. Brother Ansgar was both impressed and appalled by the man’s audacity, standing up to a marshal of the Black Templars Chapter.

‘Please accept my humble apologies, lord marshal. We are honoured indeed to be graced by the presence of brothers of the Emperor’s most devout Chapter of the Black Templars,’ the man spoke calmly and without any apparent anxiety. ‘It is just that my master is occupied in a matter of pressing importance.’

‘What? This is appalling—’

‘But Master Ourumov did ask me to bring you to him as soon as you had arrived. If you would follow me?’

Without waiting for an answer, Interrogator Helquist turned on his heel and, accompanied by the gangly Baldemar, made his way towards the splintered broad stone steps leading up to the cathedral’s entrance.

A speechless Marshal Brant had little choice but to follow.



INQUISITOR ARDUS Ourumov, I presume,’ Marshal Brant declaimed upon entering the broken nave of the cathedral building. How it reminded him of the chapter keep on Solemnus, as he first saw it on returning from his pilgrimage to the Apollo sector.

A small, stooped man, bent over a pile of debris, looked up from his examination of the rubble, his round face an inscrutable mask of indifference even though he was being addressed by a noble warrior of the Adeptus Astartes. The man straightened stiffly and walked over to the towering space marine commander.

‘And you must be Marshal Brant,’ he said, seemingly underwhelmed.

The inquisitor did not appear to be at all taken aback by the giant now addressing him, with his one ugly optical implant of an eye, a scarred face like thunder, and a look like the fury of a rad-storm barely contained behind his good right eye.

However, Marshal Brant was somewhat taken aback by Ourumov. From the man’s reputation he had been expecting someone taller, stronger-looking, younger. Someone who looked like they could at least command some authority.

But instead, here he was faced with a stooped old man with a balding pate. He looked very much like an elderly adept of the Mechanicus cult who had spent too long crouched in the labyrinthine duct-passageways of a Titan war machine, crossed with an aging rogue trader.

His robe and posture looked like those of a tech-adept, whilst his paunch, finest orox-hide boots and master-crafted holstered laspistol were those of an aging merchant comfortably retired to some hive-world palace. There was only one visible sign that anything unusual or exciting had ever happened to Ourumov and that was a three-pronged scar that traversed his head from the crown down to his jaw line.

‘Baldemar, look at this,’ the old inquisitor suddenly said, calling over the explorer and ignoring the Space Marine commander again as he returned to sifting the pile of debris. ‘It’s just as we expected.’ He paused, then looked up at

Brant again. 'Marshal Brant, you might be interested in this too.'

After a few more irritated exchanges with the capricious inquisitor, it became apparent to the Black Templars that the fate that had befallen the Sanctuary colony was indeed the same as that suffered by the chapter keep on Solemnus seven years before.

The findings of Ourumov and Baldemar's explorator team revealed that the mining colony had been attacked several months ago by the foul xenos of ork-kind. Just as on Solemnus, the orks had devastated the surface structures and there were signs that a violent struggle had taken place here. The evidence was all around them, from the bullet-holes riddling the stucco plastered walls of the cathedral and toppled columns to the crater impacts and gouges of heavier weapons fire.

But what were missing were the bodies. It appeared that either all of the colonists had been slaughtered, taken by the orks when they quit the planet, or that the miners and their families had abandoned the facility of their own accord. The last option seemed unlikely, as there had been no word from the colony for months.

'And you say that orks following the banner of a scar-faced greenskin were responsible for the destruction of your great keep?' Inquisitor Ourumov asked, turning his full attention back to the marshal, his eyes keen and full of curiosity.

'They attacked without warning, their abomination of a hulk and its attendant terror ships bombarding the site from orbit whilst something I have not seen anywhere else in all my decades of service to the Emperor – a floating asteroid-fortress – descended to the planet's surface and scoured the site with weapons of apocalyptic power.'

'Like this place, you mean?' Ourumov said, bending down and tugging something loose of the rubble at his feet.

'It would appear so, yes,' Brant replied.

'And I would concur.' The inquisitor brushed the dust from the object he had recovered from the debris with the hem of

his robe and held it up for the marshal to see. 'And this, I believe, is our proof.'

The object was obviously part of something larger. Despite the fact that more than half of it being missing, Brant could still recognise the jagged outline of an orkish head partially disfigured by a red-painted lightning scar. It was the device of the scarred ork.

'That is it!' the Space Marine commander declared excitedly. 'But do you know which tribe marches beneath this blasphemous totem?'

'Yes, I believe I do,' the old man said, craning his neck back to look up into the Space Marine's grim-set visage.

'Then tell me,' Brant demanded, fire in his voice. 'Tell me the name of that accursed tribe, that I might hunt them down and exact vengeance for the great dishonour they did our noble and righteous brotherhood!'

The old man was frustratingly quiet for a moment. Then he said, even more frustratingly, 'Before I help you, marshal, there is something that you and your Templars may assist me with.'

'What?' Brant fumed, barely able to keep his anger in check.

'Like for like, marshal. Like for like.'

'Very well.'

The old inquisitor shuffled over to Brant and lowered his voice conspiratorially. 'I have stumbled upon something of an anomaly here. You yourself may have noticed the same thing.'

'Well, yes,' Brant conceded, his curiosity subduing his anger. 'Despite the obvious signs of battle, and the ork invasion you tell me took place here, there are no bodies.'

'Indeed, my dear marshal, indeed. I have spent more years than I care to remember studying the alien ways of orks, and the eco-culture that seems to follow them wherever they go, and I know that orks would not bother to take the bodies of dead humans with them. Trophies in the form of hands or heads certainly but never whole bodies, or at least never in such numbers.'

Inquisitor Ourumov raised a hand to his face, subconsciously tracing the indenture of his scar.

'Neither have we seen evidence of any colonists scratching a living here in the months since the ork rok attack. Therefore we can surmise that none of the colonists survived to bury their dead. Besides, Chief Baldemar's team have not found any obvious gravesites in the vicinity and nor have there been any responses to numerous hails to the planet. There are no indigenous life-forms on L-739, so the question we are left with is: who took the bodies?'

Ourumov paused, letting the implications of what he had said sink in.

'Despite all the evidence to the contrary it would appear that there is something still here.'

'What do you want me and my men to do?' Brant asked resignedly. He knew when he was being given an order by one of the Emperor's Inquisition, no matter how masked it might be, and he knew better than to refuse. He had waited two years for this moment. He would simply have to wait a little longer.

'Chief Baldemar has a number of servitor teams scouring the mine-workings already but with your presence here I am rather minded of the old Necromundan saying, "Why have blindsnake when you can have amasec?" Two of your squads of noble warriors should be enough. It might be wise that the rest remain above ground. Just in case.'

Brant was suddenly aware of a commotion some metres away, where the chief explorer was now in heated discussion with a panicked adept. The adept in tow, Baldemar suddenly turned and strode towards Brant and Ourumov, his coat tails flapping around his legs.

'Excuse the interruption, my lord inquisitor,' the tall man said, 'but something dire has happened.'

'What?' the inquisitor asked urgently.

'We have lost contact with servitor-teams secundus and tertius,' Baldemar said.

'Recall Team Primus,' Ourumov instructed.

'Fintor is doing that now, lord.' Baldemar indicated the adept standing behind him who, Brant noticed, had a vox-set slung around his neck.

'Control to Team Primus. Return to initial location,' Fintor said into the vox-caster horn.

'Team Primus to control,' an electronically augmented voice, that might once have been human, grated back through a wash of static. 'Message received and understood. Returning to b-zzzkkkzzz'

There was a sudden sharp burst of interference, then the link went dead.

'What happened?' Baldemar demanded.

'I've lost contact with Team Primus, magos.'

Inquisitor Ourumov turned to Marshal Brant and looked up into his eyes, one steely and unforgiving, the other a soulless red-lensed augmetic.

'It would appear we have need of you sooner than I thought,' he said. 'Shall we go?'

At Marshal Brant's behest, Veteran Sergeant Lohengrin headed up a squad to safeguard the *Paladin*. The rest of the landing party formed up into three squads under Marshal Brant, Chaplain Wolfram and Inquisitor Ourumov. Without further delay the three squads entered the extensive mine workings beneath planet L-739's surface, intent on discovering the fate of the servitor-teams and what had happened to the human colonists of Sanctuary. Each squad was accompanied by a nervous member of Baldemar's exploratory team, the chief explorer himself guiding Inquisitor Ourumov's party into the dark echoing depths beneath this Emperor-forsaken world.

There were kilometres of tunnels, shafts, galleries and natural caverns extending from the wreckage of the stricken facility on the surface world down into the planet's mineral-rich crust. It seemed an impossible task to search them all, but then again they would not need to. They knew roughly where the

servitor teams had been when contact was been lost and that was where they would begin their search for answers. One squad for each lost team. That was how Ourumov was going to play this.



THE CLUMPING steps of the Space Marines' armoured boots resounded through the vaulted tunnels of the mine as they marched on, the ground uneven beneath their feet. The only light was provided by the lamps built into their armoured suits, the mine's own system of glow-globes having been down since the orbital attack on the outpost destroyed the generators that powered them.

The beams from Brother Ansgar's armour illuminated occasional black puddles on the floor of the tunnel. Ourumov's party were proceeding along, and also picked out endless sagging cabling hanging from stanchions hammered into the high rough roof of the passageway. The tunnel, cut by some burrowing Mechanicus machine, no doubt, was wide enough for Ourumov's party to all walk abreast had they so wished. It was one of the main access shafts running through this level of the mine, rail tracks running the length of the passage next to the crude roadway the Templars, the inquisitor and the Chief Explorator were walking along. It had survived the devastation of the ork attack above remarkably well, the only obvious damage being a series of fractures in the ceiling two hundred metres back, detected by Initiate Rivalin's auspex. The party walked on for perhaps another two hundred metres before Chief Explorator Baldemar called a halt.

'You're sure this is the place?' Inquisitor Ourumov asked.

'Based on the average pace of the servitors, the last clear signal we received from them and the time reference we have for that transmission, we should

have come across them in the last fifty metres or so,' Baldemar confirmed.

'Sigismund's sword, there's no sign of them now,' Veteran Sergeant Olaf of Castellan Gerhard's company muttered gruffly.

'Yes there is,' Initiate Josef contradicted. Rivalin trained one of his suit lamp beams on a section of tunnel wall, revealing the smear of blood and grease-oil for all to see.

'So where are they now?' Neophyte Petrus asked, uncertainty in his voice.

'That's what we're here to find out,' the inquisitor said.



IT'S A DEFINITE contact, Chaplain Wolfram,' Brother Wuhur stated, adjusting a knurled brass dial on the side of his auspex.

'And it's just the one?' Wolfram asked.

'Yes, brother.'

The chaplain peered through the ruby-eyes of his skull-face helmet into the gloom at the other end of the mine-tunnel, hefting his crozius arcanum in both gauntleted hands. Veteran-Brother Elidor trained his boltgun on the cave-in, while Gauthier aimed his plasma pistol into the enveloping darkness that was barely penetrated by the illumination of their suit lamps. Chaplain Wolfram took a step forwards.

'Be watchful, lord,' Koldo, Wolfram's sworn bodyguard, warned his master.

'But of course,' the chaplain chided. 'After all, does not the Emperor protect?'

Offering a swift prayer to the Emperor, that he might indeed protect his inquisitive servant, Wolfram continued his advance towards the rockfall. He assumed the damage had been caused by the orks' orbital bombardment. If it had happened before the attack, the miners would surely have made the necessary repairs or cordoned off the area.

There was a scrabbling sound ahead of him and a swift-moving shadow passed before the chaplain's enhanced vision and behind a broken spar.

'Chaplain Wolfram!' It was Wuhur again. 'Am now reading four contacts – no, six, seven... multiple contacts, and closing.'

'Sons of Sigismund!' Wolfram declared with furious zeal. 'Prepare to be enlightened!'



NOTHING,' THE Space Marine commander stated, his voice heavy with foreboding. 'The place is clean, just like the outpost above.'

Marshal Brant's party were standing at the edge of a vast gallery that had been cut through the rock of the planet to a height, or depth, of a hundred metres. High above them a network of grilled metal walkways criss-crossed the hollowed out space that looked large enough to contain the exploratory vessel *Antiquitas*. His suit's auto-senses and his own heightened olfactory senses told him that the still air in the chamber was dust dry. But there was something else too.

'So what happened to the colonists?' Brother Hale asked uneasily.

'Something took them,' Apostle-Brother Uchdryd suggested ominously. Uchdryd had an uncanny sense of the otherworldly, although there was nothing of the psyker about him, otherwise he would never have been admitted to the holy order, but his prophetic sixth sense had marked him out as a potential chaplain, a warrior-priest amongst an order of warrior-monks.

'Marshal Brant, I have multiple targets incoming from the west,' the crimson-armoured Tech-Marine Isendur stated, no hint of emotion, excitement or anxiety, in his voice, his servo-arm twitching as if with a life of its own.

Brant cast his gaze to the far end of the gallery. Even through the genetor-engineered enhanced vision of his good right eye he could not yet see anything. The optical implant that stood in place of his left eye whirred and clicked as lenses strained to see into the distant gloom. There was a dull click and then an image came into resolution. There was something moving at the far end of the gallery.

'We have multiple incoming contacts, men. Offer yourselves to the Emperor, pray that you might know the righteous zeal of Lord Sigismund and prepare to engage.'

There was the clattering of weapons being readied behind the marshal. Brant raised his left arm into the air, his black-painted power fist crackling with a scintillating blue energy field.

'No pity!' the Black Templar marshal bellowed, commencing the traditional battle cry of his holy Chapter. 'No remorse!' The first of the rapidly advancing attackers came within visual range of the other battle-brothers. 'No fear!'

A crashing cacophony of sound swelled into the darkened vault of the mine as the Black Templars fired their battle-consecrated weapons.



WITH A GRINDING, descending pitched whine the elevator slowed and stopped with a rattling clunk and Inquisitor Ourumov's party stepped out. Brother Ansgar took in this new location, ever watchful for signs of danger, defensible positions or, if necessary, potential escape routes.

They were standing outside the bottom of the service elevator shaft in the deepest part of the mine. The scoping beams of the Space Marines' suit-lamps partially illuminated a large, natural cavern. Ancient stalactites hung

from the domed roof while organic matter growing on the mineral deposits glowed with a faint luminescence. The air down here smelt damp and musty.

Some alterations had been made to the cave-chamber. Power couplings snaked from the spools of wire at the foot of the grilled elevator shaft across the uneven cavern floor to unlit glow-globes, and a number of anonymous packing crates and barrels had been stacked seemingly haphazardly at various points throughout the cavern.

The whole space was as large as the nave of the command bridge aboard the battle-barge *Divine Fury* waiting in orbit a hundred kilometres above their current location, Ansgar thought. But the one thing that dominated the chamber was the solid steel bulkhead built into the wall on the other side of the cavern space.

'Aha!' Inquisitor Ourumov announced abruptly. 'Just as I thought.'

'You know what lies beyond this bulkhead?' Veteran Sergeant Olaf inquired, his distrust of the erratic old man apparent in his tone.

'Yes, my dear sergeant,' Ourumov replied, almost condescendingly, 'the answer to the question of what happened to the colonists.'

They all heard the sudden panicked bleeping of Rivalin's auspex and turned as one to face him, Brother-Initiate Melegant raising his chainsword and preparing to activate its ignition rune.

'Inquisitor, brothers,' Rivalin said, 'I am picking up multiple contacts moving this way at speed.'

'From where, brother Templar? From where?' Ourumov demanded.

As he did so, Brother Ansgar and the others shone their suit beams into the shadowed corners of the cave and up at the stalactite festooned dome above them. Things were moving there, clambering among the jagged rock formations and crawling from crevices in the cavern walls, using their unnatural, taloned limbs to maintain a purchase.

'From everywhere,' Rivalin replied.

THE ROAR OF bolter fire, the zealous shouts of the Marines and Chaplain Wolfram's own bellowed battle-prayers urging the Templars on, echoed deafeningly from the tunnel walls. The cacophony was swelled by the screaming cries of their attackers. Amidst the press of the black-armoured giants, the explorer assigned to Wolfram's squad screamed in hysterical fear, no use to anyone.

The inevitable battle had begun in the confined, half-collapsed tunnel, the fighting hard and furious. And the enemy was relentless.

The mine was infested. They came at the Templars in their dozens, armoured hides mottled pink, purple and blue, glistening wetly, springing forward on muscular legs, grabbing with clawing hands, while a third pair of limbs slashed at the holy warriors with oversized talons. Where these dreadful claws struck the verse-inscribed ceramite of the Black Templars' armour they gouged great grooves in the surface, even cutting through as deeply as the Space Marines locked inside them.

A ravening creature sprang at Wolfram, beady black eyes set in the dome of its bulbous head fixing on his behind the ruby-quartz visor of his skull-helm. It opened its fang-filled jaws, emitting a screeching cry that cut through the veteran chaplain.

With a roar born of righteous fury, Wolfram brought the blazing head of his crozius arcanum up into what passed for the monster's midriff. In a mess of purple ichor, ropes of intestines flopped from the creature's body, coiling around the haft of the power axe as the flaring razor-edged blades of its Templar-cross head burst from the alien's back in a blaze of blue sparks.

Genestealers, the chaplain thought. An abomination in the eyes of all Emperor-fearing people and their presence a foul stain on the face of His Imperial Majesty's galaxy-spanning realm.

Oh, how he hated the foul xenos spawn.



LETTING OFF controlled bursts of weapons fire into the mass of alien bodies scrambling towards them, Marshal Brant and his men held their position at the entrance to the gallery. As the grotesque genestealers flung themselves at the embattled Space Marines, in wave after wave, the ardent Black Templars cut them down with sustained bolter, melta and plasma fire.

One or two rapidly moving creatures managed to evade this curtain of fire, flinging themselves at the gunning Templars with phenomenal bursts of speed. These were felled by chainsword, combat knife and crippling blows from armoured fists powered by muscles strong enough to lift the end of a truck.

Brant heard a stifled cry behind him. Darting a glance backwards he saw Brother Taran, his meltagun dropped on the ground in front of him, trying to stem the geyser of blood fountaining from his neck where one of the alien abominations had punched a taloned limb right through his power armour and into the flesh beneath. Even Taran's genetically altered body could not hope to overcome such a terrible injury and he collapsed to his knees before keeling over onto his face, his lifeblood pumping from his dying body.

Taran's killer was crouched behind its victim like a spider about to spring.

The marshal leapt at the genestealer, blasting at it with his bolt pistol as he brought his crackling power fist down on it. Shards of chitinous armour flew from the genestealer's body where the explosive bolts impacted, its elongated skull bursting like an overripe fruit as the club-like fist connected.

The Solemnus Crusade had come to this Emperor-forsaken world hunting orks, Brant considered, but had found the

advance forces of the even more alien tyrannid – and death.

'Lord marshal!' Brother Hale called, his voice almost drowned out by the roar of Terminator-Brother Nudd's storm bolter. 'Inquisitor Ourumov informs that his party are encountering heavy resistance at what he believes to be the heart of the enemy's operations.'

Genestealer uprising, Brant thought. It was obvious now.

'Brother Hale, be so good as to inform the inquisitor that we too are engaged in combat with elements of the xenos cult,' Brant stated darkly.

Another hissing alien sprang at him, mouth wide open. Brant put a bolt between its jaws, blowing out the back of its skull in a mess of what passed for alien blood and brain matter. The creature fell at the marshal's feet, half way through its lunge, twitching in its death-spasms, purple ichor spurting from the ruined dome of its skull and splashing the hem of Brant's habit-robe.

'Marshal Brant.' It was Hale again. 'Inquisitor Ourumov says that his squad will contain the menace and that the rest of us should exit the mine, return to the fleet and purge this world from orbit. He has given the order for Exterminatus.'

An unreal silence seemed to descend over the Black Templars, even amidst the storm of battle.

Brant bristled at being given orders, even if they did come from an Imperial inquisitor.

'What, and condemn my men fighting with him to death?' he railed. 'We are brothers of the Black Templars Chapter, warriors of the holy Adeptus Astartes. We do not run from battle. We face it head on. No, this is our last crusade. By Sigismund, I will not leave a single man behind if I can help it!'

Another two screaming alien creatures fell by the marshal's hand, one to blasts from his bolt pistol, the other decapitated by a flat-handed chop from his lethal power fist.

'Tell the inquisitor that there is another way. This place has already survived one orbital bombardment where our own

mighty chapter keep fell to the self-same attackers. And after the Merethyl affair our fleet does not carry any Exterminatus measures.'

'What is that other way, lord?' Initiate Carrado spoke up. One of the longest serving of Marshal Brant's men, he could say what others dared not. 'We are outnumbered. Uland has reported that Chaplain Wolfram's squad are in the same position as, it would seem, are our battle-brothers who fight at the inquisitor's side.

'There has to be another way to bring this accursed mine down upon the foul xenos!' Brant bellowed in frustrated anger.

'I have a suggestion,' Tech-Marine Isendur announced calmly in that infuriatingly unemotional tone of his, hacking down a multi-limbed monstrosity as he did so. His crimson armour was awash with sticky purple fluid, as was the blade of his Mechanicus-forged power axe.

'Well, what do you suggest?' Brant growled over the roar of discharging weapons and the screams of the aliens.

'Readings relayed to me by my suit's machine-spirit suggest that the isotope vein that has been tapped in this gallery is unstable. It would not be difficult to set the appropriate explosive charges that would detonate the isotope, effectively turning it into a massively destructive bomb.'

'Then do it!' Brant commanded. 'Inform our brethren that we will scour this place clean of its genestealer nest. And tell them to get out now, the inquisitor included!'

Tech-Marine Isendur and Brother Hale gave their affirmative responses and the other brothers prepared to cover them as they carried out the marshal's orders.

'Hale,' Brant added, the commanding tone of his voice causing the Templar to pause. 'What of Chaplain Wolfram?'



CHAPLAIN WOLFRAM swung his sacred weapon in a wide arc, removing both the arm and half the

head of one of the alien abominations. The widely swinging beams of the Templars' suit lamps and the stuttering blasts of bolter fire threw the battle at the cave-in into stark strobing clarity, moments of battle caught in a tableau formed by the intermittent flashes of frozen light.

Wolfram suddenly reeled, as a bolt of intense, raw emotional energy seemed to rip through him and twist in his gut. It felt like his mind had been stripped of all the emotional barriers he had built up in his life – devotion to the Emperor, zealous pride, righteous fury – until all that was left was primal fear, devouring him from within, and he was like a tiny child curled in foetal fear before the overwhelming evil of an alien-spawned psychic power.

The chaplain, unprepared for such a devastating mental attack, fell to his knees, many of his brothers collapsing around him even in the face of the aliens' attack. Both Naois and Kier were cut down, whilst at their most defenceless, as a result. Wolfram gripped the haft of his holy weapon in one hand taking hold of his blessed rosarius in the other and immediately felt the Emperor's divine power start to fight back against the coldly burning psychic fire scouring the surface of his mind.

Warpcraft, he thought, the word itself expressed as a curse in his mind. Whatever else the attack might have taken from him, he still had his faith.

Wolfram opened his eyes, only then realising that they had been closed tight in light of the psychic strike. Standing behind the broken beams of the roof fall was a curiously robed figure, the bald and heavily boned dome of its head highlighted by the crackling nimbus of energy surrounding it. Its eyes glowed from within the shadowed pits beneath its heavy brow.

Chaplain Wolfram rose to his feet, fighting against the fear-inducing psychic spell conjured by the cult magus with every muscle movement, hefting his crozius in both hands now. He could feel the hot wetness of blood dripping from his nose.

'No... fear,' he managed through gritted teeth. 'No pity,' he declared, staggering steps becoming a strong stride once again. 'No remorse!' he bellowed as he charged the magus.



INQUISITOR OURUMOV targeted another half-alien, half-human cultist with his laspistol and fired, putting an instantly cauterised hole through the middle of its brain with one clean shot. To either side of him the Templar brothers Ansgar and Meleagant stood, towering over the old man like two heroes from the golden age of the Imperium, firing into the cultist pack with their furiously-blazing boltguns.

The purestrain genestealers that had initially engaged Ourumov's party had soon been joined by the semi-human members of the alien cult as the bulkhead door had ground open. Where the aliens attacked with tooth and claw, their infected human brethren were armed with all manner of firearms and mining equipment, which was being used as makeshift weapons. The genestealers were deadly up close but posed little threat to the likes of Space Marines at a distance. Now that weakness had been compensated for.

Ardus Ourumov now understood what must have happened here. The genestealer cult had already been well established on L-739 before the orks came but was trapped on this desolate rock, dependant on the arrival of vessels intended to transport the isotope mined here to other Imperium worlds for their means of spreading the xenos corruption further into the Emperor's blessed realm.

When the ork attack did come, the human contingent of the cult must have soon realised that they were outnumbered, and without the weapons silos required to defend against an attack from space, they retreated into the mine, sealing themselves inside the chambers

they had already created at the bottom of the mine, shielded behind the heavy bulkhead to safeguard the patriarch, the foul 'father' of their heretical cult.

However, there was now a means for the cultists to get off-planet, so that the perverse 'family' could continue to grow, with the presence of the explorator vessel *Antiquitas* and the Templar fleet. So it was that, as soon as the cult's territory was invaded once again, and this time on a smaller scale, a higher, albeit primitive power spurred its members into aggressive action.

Ourumov felt a sudden, hot stab of pain in his chest and then cold realisation swept through him and his body began to grow numb from that point outwards. He looked down, as if seeing himself through the eyes of another, and saw the spreading red stain around the ragged hole in his robe and the flesh beneath.

A bullet wound, as simple as that, but in the right place fatal.

He had served the Emperor's Inquisition for over two hundred years, fighting the 'enemy without' across the Segmentum Solar and beyond. He had lived through raids by piratical eldar, suffered terrible injuries in duels with the mercenary kroot and even been shot with a hrud fusil rifle and survived. He had always believed that when the Emperor deemed it was time for Arduus Ourumov to join him in the world hereafter, it would be in some dramatic climax to a life-long career, not simply shot by a lucky half-human xenos cultist.

But that was one of the unpredictable eccentricities of life, he told himself as he slipped into unconsciousness and, more importantly, death.



TECH-MARINE ISENDUR'S charges having been set, Marshal Brant's party made for the surface again. The Space Marines continued to lay down a

hail of fire as they made their fighting retreat, alien bodies piled three or four deep in their wake. They left behind also their fallen Battle-Brothers Taran, Drust and the aspiring Uchdryd.

Twenty metres through the crust above them, Chaplain Wolfram brought his flaming cross-axe down on the head of the magus, splintering bone and splitting it in two down to the stump of the creature's neck. At once the Templars were freed of the malign psyker influence. The wrathful warriors set about extracting their revenge on the remaining alien abominations, avenging the deaths of Brothers Naois, Keir and Wuhur. Their explorator guide also lay among the dead, disembowelled by a claw-handed fiend.

At the bottom of the deepest mine shaft things looked even bleaker.



THE UNCONSCIOUS inquisitor slung over one broad armoured shoulder, Brother Ansgar strode towards the elevator, spraying furious bolter fire into the alien-human pack clawing at his heels.

There was nothing the Templars could do for Ourumov here, in the middle of a battle. Besides, it looked serious for the old man. Not possessing the preternaturally quick-clotting blood of a Space Marine, he was bleeding to death through the wound blasted by the xenos-cursed bullet. Following his marshal's orders, Ansgar and the rest of the squad were making their way back towards the surface, two thousand metres above.

Brother-Initiate Josef and Neophyte Petrus were ahead of him, bundling Explorator Baldemar between them into the open cage of the lift. Veteran Sergeant Olaf was the one covering their escape now, retributational fire spewing from his boltgun, Meleagant and Rivalin having already having fallen beneath the swarming alien pack.

There would be time to mourn them later. For now the priority for the survivors was to get back to the surface, so that the Black Templars might finish their work and purge Mining Facility Outpost Beta-Three of its infestation.

Brother Ansgar stumbled, almost falling to his knees and dropping the inquisitor, as a bow wave of psychic energy hit them. The surge of warp power made his stomach turn over and his vision grey as he almost blacked out. Ourumov groaned weakly. Taking a deep breath, Ansgar managed to recover himself enough to stumble the last few steps to the elevator cage after his brothers, even as a genestealer sank its talons into a greave of his armour.

Turning, he saw within the open bulkhead the silhouette of a grossly bloated, six-limbed fiend. The creature had the appearance of a genestealer but was many times larger. Everything about it was over-sized, from its monstrous claws to its bulbous distended cranium. This, Ansgar knew, was the first of its kind on this world, the father of the cult, its patriarch.

So imbued with instinctive psyker power was the alien that foul warp energy coruscated across its head, making the musty, stale air of the mine heavy with the tang of ozone and filling the Space Marines with a sick feeling to the very core of their being.

It seemed to Ansgar that the alien patriarch fixed its black, soulless eyes on the Templars as they gunned down the genestealers still rushing towards them across the cavern. Then his knees buckled again as another wave of sickening psyker energy hit the party full on. Baldemar vomited and the other Space Marines also wavered, Neophyte Petrus falling against the side of the cage with a resounding clang of ceramite on steel.

The only one who seemed resistant to the psychic attack was Olaf. Before anyone else could do anything, the veteran sergeant turned back to face the alien onslaught, striding away from the elevator. The only word he uttered was, 'Go!'

Tearing bodies apart with bolter fire and chainsword, proclaiming the glory of the Emperor and the damnation of the alien as written in the same scriptures inscribed upon his holy firearm, he marched into the midst of the attacking cult.

Without further hesitation, Brother Josef slammed his hand against the ascent-rune inscribed button. With a wailing of klaxons, yellow hazard lights cycling and a noisy grinding sound, the elevator cage began to climb.

Ansgar stared into the cavern below as Veteran Sergeant Olaf fought his way through the cult-pack, against insurmountable odds, towards the grotesquely swollen form of the patriarch, which towered over even this armoured giant, bellowing the battle-cry of the Black Templars, until the scene of carnage disappeared, the lift rising beyond the roof of the cave.

A moment later he saw purple and blue bodies forcing themselves into the shaft itself and begin to ascend, the six limbs of the purestrain genestealers allowing them to move as quickly up the scarred-rock sides of the shaft as across open ground.

'Brothers!' Ansgar warned, indicating the approaching aliens through the grilled floor of the cage-lift with his boltgun. 'We are not rid of the xenos yet.'

Taking careful aim between the bars, the Templars fired their weapons in a deafening clattering cacophony of explosive-shelled retribution.

As the elevator sped upwards through the darkness, the Space Marines' bolter fire lit up the space beneath the cage, briefly illuminating the scrambling forms of alien bodies racing up the tunnel after the lift, before they tumbled back into the darkness screeching, their bodies ripped open by bolter shells. The openings to tunnels and galleries leading off from the main shaft flashed past, square black holes picked out in the momentary passing sodium light.

Even over the roar of their guns Ansgar heard the dull boom of the explosion. The allotted time having past, Tech-Marine Isendur's charges had detonated, turning the unstable isotope seam into a

devastating seismic bomb. As well as purging the mine workings with fire, the explosion would collapse the tunnels and bury the mine. There was a series of further explosions causing the elevator to rock violently within the shaft. As the isotope vein erupted, and the very bedrock of the planet fractured, genestealers were shaken free of their precarious grasp on the tunnel walls and plunged back down into the bowels of the planet.

For a moment, as the cage rattled on the end of twanging stress-straining cables, Brother Ansgar wondered if the survivors of Ourumov's party would be joining the doomed aliens. Then the quake subsided and the elevator resumed its ascent. In the distant depths Ansgar could see a point of fiery light blossom in the blackness and swell as the fireball roared up the shaft, consuming those aliens in its path still clinging to the sides of the borehole.

There was nothing Ansgar and the other Templars could do now but pray to the Emperor, their primarch Rogal Dorn and the saintly Lord Sigismund for their divine protection. So pray they did.



THE SURVIVING Black Templars burst from the mine head, those cathedral ruins previously still standing tumbling down around them. Sergeant Lohengrin's squad, who had been left on the surface, covered their escape, making sure that none of the alien abominations followed their battle-brothers out of the mine.

The men of the three parties that had penetrated the mine sprinted from the facility, despite the strain their bodies were beginning to feel from battling the genestealer cult, escaping just before the entire facility was swallowed by the planet, with a primordial roar, as massive subsidence following in the wake of the devastating explosion caused the mine beneath it to collapse utterly.

Of the twenty-three warriors who had entered the accursed labyrinth beneath L-739, only fourteen had returned to the surface. There had been other casualties too, of course, the explorator guides among them, but most notably Inquisitor Arduus Ourumov himself. The ground still shaking, as Fulgerium Mining Outpost Beta-Three continued to disintegrate behind them, Brother Ansgar laid the inquisitor's body on the ground in the shadow cast by the *Paladin*.

Marshal Brant, his ornate armour and habit-robe drenched with alien blood, looked down at the inquisitor. They were too late. There was nothing more they could do for him. The man who knew the identity of the greenskins who followed the icon of the scarred ork, the man who held the key to them accomplishing their last crusade, the man who had led a hundred purges on a hundred worlds, and who had been a feared and respected member of the Ordo Xenos for the last two centuries, was dead. And so too was the information Brant had crossed light years to recover.

Cautiously Interrogator Helquist approached the glowering Space Marine, the baleful red optical implant making Brant's expression appear even more threatening and malevolent.

'My lord marshal,' Helquist said deferentially, 'I know that had Inquisitor Ourumov survived, he would have told you what you wanted to know.'

'Had he survived,' Brant growled.

'And he still might,' Helquist went on.

'How can he? Dead men keep their secrets.'

'There is a way,' Helquist cast his eyes awkwardly at the ground. 'I have some telepathic ability. The inquisitor has not been dead long. I might still be able to glean the information you require from his mind before it is gone forever.'

'What? Witchcraft?' Brant riled. 'You would suggest that a marshal of the most devout Black Templars Chapter – who have persecuted witches across the Imperium of mankind throughout our ten

thousand year history – debase himself by using such treacherous, blasphemous means to uncover the secrets of the dead?'

Silence hung in the air between the Space Marine and the interrogator for a moment.

'It could be the only way,' Helquist said simply.



A GRIM-FACED Marshal Brant gazed across the bridge of the fleet flagship *Divine Fury*, at the yellow-ochre planet retreating into the void as displaced on the ship's view-screen. The recycled air seemed touched with cold after the heat of the world below. 'Two hours to warp jump point,' a junior bridge officer informed his commander.

'Prepare for a ship-wide communication,' Brant ordered.

Comms-slaved servitors opened appropriate channels throughout the five kilometre-long vessel.

'Brothers, while we mourn the loss of our brethren who fell protecting one of the Emperor's worlds from the advance of the accursed genestealers, remember that they did not die in vain. For not only is the planet, named here as Sanctuary, free of its xenos infestation and clean again in the sight of the Emperor, I also now have the information for which we have travelled so far and so long.

'The aliens who perpetrated the vilest of acts against our chapter on Solemnus, who follow the debased image of the Scarred Ork, are the Blood Scar tribe. Now our enemy has a name, we shall hunt the greenskins down and be avenged upon them for the honour they stole from us, for our brothers who have died in pursuit of this quest, for all that they have cost us so dearly. They shall not escape our wrath, for they can run but they can hide no longer, for this is our last crusade!' ★



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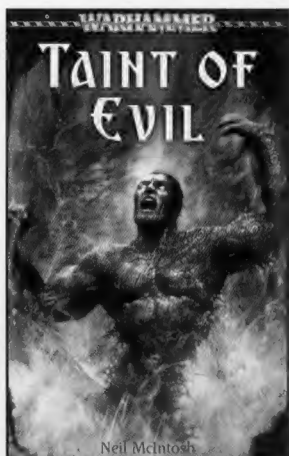
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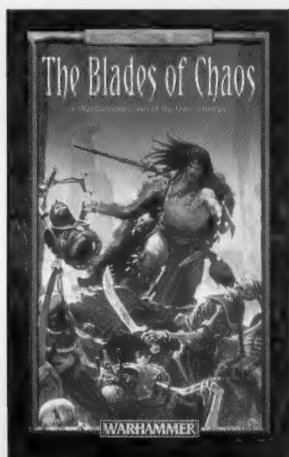
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Somehow, Sheerglas had not fallen under the weight of the men who had rushed him. Indeed, like a shadow, he seemed to separate himself from them, sending several tumbling to the ground. He had drawn no weapons. A bladesman rushed him, and Sheerglas sidestepped, catching the wrist of the thrusting sword-arm and breaking the elbow joint with a savage upward blow of his other hand. The guard screamed and fell back, and Sheerglas took the Estalian rapier from his hand, drifting around like smoke to engage three more of the black-garbed soldiers. Sparks flew from the flickering blades.

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Consciously willing his optic nerves to contract, he thumbed a stud at one end of the tube. With the brilliant fury of a supernova, a sputtering blaze of light erupted from the flare rod, filling the chamber with shuddering, actinic colour. The caged ones screamed, their faces caught in a frieze of cold white. Tarikus's eyes were fixed on the enemy before him, the foe revealed at last before the flare's illumination.

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From out of the dazzling whirling snow they came, falling on us like daemons. Cruel blades glinted in the cold light as the elves hacked and lunged. Frozen fingers fought to grip the hafts of weapons, and warm blood washed over the icy deck. I fought blind, with the snow in my eyes, and in my fear I struck wildly at every shape that came near me. Sigmar preserve me, but in those moments of panic I knew not what, nor whom I struck with my clumsy blows.

• **SANCTUARY by Jonathan Green**

The mine was infested. They came at the Templars in their dozens, armoured hides mottled pink, purple and blue, glistening wetly, springing forward on muscular legs, grabbing with clawing hands, while a third pair of limbs slashed at the holy warriors with oversized talons. Where these dreadful claws struck the verse-inscribed ceramite of the Black Templars' armour they gouged great grooves in the surface, even cutting through as deeply as the Space Marines locked inside them.

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